Cybersobriety

How a commercially driven Internet threatens the foundations of democratic self-governance and what to do about it

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Competing technological myths

With technology supercharging the new century, two myths vie for supremacy in the United States. The first might be christened “Genesis, Chapter 51”:

And finally it came to pass that God repented of the punishment which God had meted out to Eve and Adam. And God gave unto Eve and Adam and all of their descendants as a gift unto them forever a new Garden, which was full of all manner of wondrous things. And these included all the knowledge from the Tree of Life of which people were needful in order to make for themselves lives of peace, grace, and abundance. And God saw that it was good. And also God gave unto Eve and Adam and all of their descendants the ability to share knowledge among themselves, to communicate easily among themselves no matter where or how far apart they might variously journey, to form themselves into groups howsoever they might wish, and to produce as though in an instant all the things necessary for their comfort and enjoyment. And the name for this new Garden of knowledge-without-limit which the Lord God gave unto all the people living upon the face of the Earth was Cyberspace.

The second myth follows a far bleaker script, “Net Wars, Episode 1 – The Empire Is Assembled”:

Long, long ago, on a planet far, far away (Earth, 1992–1995). Noble visionaries struggle to create an Internet grounded in principles of universal access, free speech, personal privacy, and support for civic uses. Overwhelmed by the financial and political power of businesses jockeying for advantage in the emerging global tele-economy, their heroic efforts fail. Their symbolic moment of defeat is February 1996, when the US Congress enacts the Telecommunications Policy Act (“the best law money could buy,” according to embittered survivors of the visionary cause). The Internet is swiftly reconstituted as a medium dominated and driven by commercial interests.

Adherents of Genesis 51 herald the Internet and other new communication technologies as forces that will educate and empower individuals, expand wealth, and reinvigorate democracy. The Net-War critics insist that a heavily commercialized Internet will cement social inequality and hierarchy. Their chief complaint: Internet access is skewed toward the socially advantaged, while the poorest among us are shut out. Provided this racial and class bias can be overcome, this critique goes, the Internet’s positive democratic potential will unfold. Who is right, the optimists or skeptics? Most likely both, but also, in significant and disturbing ways, neither. Each ignores potential avenues by which an Internet driven by powerful commercial interests can undermine the foundations of democratic self-governance. Moreover, unless preventive measures are taken, the dangers would be just as great, if not greater, in the event that universal, affordable access to the Internet is actually achieved.

The Internet has, of course, yielded a variety of striking social and political benefits. Certain forms of information about government, commerce, and the world generally are becoming much more widely available. People can communicate with one another and organize in exciting new ways. Rural areas have access to data and services that once were to be had only in metropolitan centers. Dissidents struggling under authoritarian foreign regimes are able to circumvent censorship.

Moreover, the goal of forging a more equitable society, in which the benefits of electronic networking are available to the poor, is vitally important. But “universal and affordable access,” as currently formulated, is a faulty prescription for realizing that objective. Under current policy regimes — and given the dynamics of social and technological change that I shall shortly describe — the quest for universal access could easily overshoot the mark into an over-wielded world. Before long we may find ourselves living in a society of inescapable, compulsory access. The erosion of conventional, offline modes of social and economic interaction could not only force people to use the Internet involuntarily, but would also produce a host of other personal and civic harms.

Consider the history of another powerfully seductive, personal technology. The United States has more or less achieved universal, affordable access to private automobiles, with some profoundly positive — and profoundly negative — results. Automobiles have supported personal mobility and freedom, as well as the expansion of vast industries. But the proliferation of cars and trucks has also constrained us to endure daily traffic jams, air pollution, the ill effects of suburban sprawl, tens of thousands of annual road fatalities, and dependence on non-renewable and insecure sources of imported oil. In the process, we have created a society in which owning an automobile and driving upwards of 10,000 miles a year has become, for most Americans, not at all a voluntary option. This exemplifies what cultural iconoclast Ivan Illich calls “radical monopoly.” Automotive technology and its supporting institutions have rendered alternative modes of existence inaccessible, thereby imposing use of a car as compulsory (Sclove and Scheuer, 1996; Illich, 1973).
If we now have second thoughts about how our society achieved universal access to the automobile, there are sound reasons to suspect that we will feel every bit as ambivalent about the manner in which we are pursuing universal Internet access. On the other hand, a technology's contradictory social consequences need not be accepted whole cloth. Wise policies governing the design and use of a technology can encourage its benign effects and lessen the deleterious ones. Unwise policies can do the opposite.

In the United States no popular clamor for building a new road system pressured Congress to pass the Interstate Highway Act in 1956. Only about half of American families owned a car. Everyone else depended on public transportation. Auto-makers, road-builders, and realtors who saw profits in developing suburban subdivisions, however, all lobbied Congress aggressively. In response, lawmakers created the Highway Trust Fund, earmarking taxes from gasoline sales for highway construction. Public transit systems, unable to compete with subsidized automobiles, rapidly atrophied. Soon more Americans were forced to buy a car to shop or to hold a job. So the tremendous social transformation that followed hinged upon the political muscle of powerful business interests and external compulsion—not simply the free choices of consumers and certainly not any inexorable internal logic of technological development (Hink, 1988: 358–373).

Western European nations, in contrast, opted for different public policies governing transportation systems (ibid.: 373–376). The results include networks of bicycle lanes and public transit systems that are comparatively comfortable, extensive, and easy to use.

**Democratic impacts**

The Internet's commercial development poses a political issue that may prove at least as defining for our social future as did the politics of automobile use. For instance, in 2001 US President George W. Bush and the Congress extended the Internet Tax Freedom Act of 1998 for two years, continuing to exempt most online commerce from sales tax (Hardisty, 2001b). President Bush (like President Clinton before him), along with some leading US congressmen, wants to permanently exempt e-commerce from existing sales taxes. Critics counter that the loss of revenue to state and local governments would endanger schools, roads, and other essential public functions. The Internet tax policies that Congress is continuing to debate will profoundly influence the democratic structure of our society for decades to come.

Unfortunately, to date that debate has been narrowly preoccupied with economic considerations. Such a single-minded focus is dangerously short-sighted. When fundamental impacts on democracy and civil society are at stake, they too should occupy a central position in policy deliberations. Here I am thinking of "democracy" in the broad sense that the philosopher John Dewey (1954) envisioned it—as a form of social organization in which all people have opportunities to develop their capacities as independent moral agents and to influence the basic, shared circumstances of their lives.

The larger issues of democracy extend far beyond the prevailing economic calculations about how businesses, consumers, and governments can most profitably cash in on the Internet. Do we, as a society, have the civic maturity to acknowledge the emerging virtues of cyberspace, inquire into the offsetting liabilities to democracy, and then implement public policies that will enhance the former while minimizing the latter? Probably not, as I shall explain. Still, there are feasible fall-back actions that can reduce Internet-induced harm, while building an organized social base that will make it possible in the future to redesign the Internet in a form more responsive to democratic values.

To think through the Internet's civic liabilities, let's start with an elementary question that should be applied to any technology-inspired vision: "Suppose that vision is fully realized, what would be the problems?" In this case, what would be the problems with universal access to a commercially driven Internet?

**The Cybernetic Wal-Mart Effect**

This little piggy went to market,
Another piggy shopped online from home,
The second piggy paid no sales tax,
So why do both feel disempowered and alone?

Consider the case of electronic commerce. Businesses going online can prove a boon for consumers. But as this trend deepens, what does it mean for democracy and civic life? Among the first casualties might be local economies, by which I mean local capacities to produce enough goods and services to meet a fair share of local needs. In our own lifetime, Wal-Mart has become a symbol for the malling of America, which has wiped out many individual mom-and-pop retail stores. I'm concerned that the Internet can extend this trend via a "Cybernetic Wal-Mart Effect."

Imagine what happens when a Wal-Mart store opens on the outskirts of a town. Suppose that half the residents start to do one-third of their shopping at Wal-Mart. That means they still do two-thirds of their shopping downtown, while the remaining half of the population does all its shopping downtown. Thus everyone wants downtown to remain vibrant. However, if half the people do a third of their shopping at Wal-Mart, you've extracted about 16.7 percent of the revenue from the downtown and neighborhood economy. If profit margins aren't high, that's enough to start shutting down the downtown. Here we have a perverse market dynamic—a loss to the entire community that not a single person wanted. And it is a coercive, self-reinforcing dynamic. Once the downtown starts to shut down, people who preferred to shop there by default must now switch to Wal-Mart. Social scientists call this a "collective action problem"—a situation in which private rationality produces a socially irrational outcome (e.g., Hardin, 1982).
The Cybernetic Wal-Mart Effect - as more and more commerce goes online - aggravates the conventional "Wal-Mart" dynamic. Online, you're not just competing with Wal-Mart, you're competing with the full global marketplace. Moreover, Wal-Marts basically threaten mom-and-pop retail shops. Online commerce can spread out into every sector of the economy, including local manufacturers, businesses, suppliers, and even service providers, such as accountants and lawyers (e.g., Tedeschi, 2000a).

Assuredly, some local businesses will thrive and grow by going online themselves. But the advertising economies of scale in attracting customers to a select number of hot websites suggest that before long the global economy will consolidate into a smaller number of prominent, large, very un-local enterprises. As an analyst from a leading Internet consulting firm explained to the New York Times in 1999: "It's not a pretty picture for local merchants... . National players have the deep pockets to create [Web] sites with the best user experience and market them. And the mom-and-pops don't have that." 4

Consumers versus citizens

If we are thinking of ourselves solely as consumers, this Cybernetic Wal-Mart Effect is not a problem. But the catch is that we are not simply consumers. We are also family members, friends, local community members, and workers. From the standpoint of democratic politics, above all we are citizens.

As consumers, we always want to know, "Is this the best deal for me?" But when we assume the posture of democratic citizens, we pause and remember that we are more than acquisitive egoists. As citizens, we seek to act as moral agents committed to advancing the common good, and we ask a broader question: "Does this proposed change serve the overall well-being of everyone in our society, including our first-order interest in preserving and improving the character of our democracy?"

Viewed from this democratic citizen's perspective, the Cybernetic Wal-Mart Effect is problematic. Remember that it propagates through a coercive, self-reinforcing dynamic. My online shopping contributes to shrinking the local economy, forcing you to go online because local alternatives are no longer available. That dynamic, which forecloses your option of choosing a locally oriented way of life or of choosing to remain offline, represents an entirely involuntary imposition.

But the anti-democratic implications of the Cybernetic Wal-Mart Effect reach further. Eviscerating a local economy weakens local culture and community vibrancy. That's bad in its own right. But it's also bad for democracy, because as social bonds weaken, people relinquish mutual understanding and the capacity for collective action. Those are essential foundations of a workable democracy (Bowles and Gintis, 1986).

The destruction of local economies furthermore translates into greater local dependence on national and global market forces and on distant corporate headquarters - powers that communities can't control. The locus of effective political intervention thus shifts toward more distant centers. Everyday citizens can't be as effective in these distant centers as in smaller political settings, so democracy is further impaired.

Serfing the Net

Businesses, moreover, are using computer networks to consolidate high-level managerial control over their expanding global operations. As a result, corporations are becoming ever more interdependent with individual workers, trade unions, and even national governments. As a cover story in Business Week boasted some years ago, "new 'stateless' megacorporations are 'leaping boundaries' to intimidate labor unions, elude domestic political opposition, threaten meddling government officials with plant closure and capital flight, and sidestep regulatory hurdles." 5

In addition, the volume and speed of electronic transfers in the global financial system highlights the threat of capital flight. Manuel Castells vividly describes how global electronic networks both alter and deepen the politically coercive implications inherent in this threat:

It is only in the late twentieth century that the world economy was able to become truly global on the basis of the new infrastructure provided by information and communication technologies... . A global economy is a historically new reality... it is an economy with the capacity to work as a unit in real time on a planetary scale... . Capital flows become at the same time global and increasingly autonomous vis-à-vis the actual performance of economies.

(Castells, 1996: 92-93)

Here is an entirely new twist to the issue, transforming financial instabilities that were formerly localized and episodic into the chronic condition of the entire world economy. With capital soaring aloft in perpetually global motion, national governments that formally feared capital "flight" now compete for transitory capital "alight." This constrains what elected leaders dare say and do, further compromising the democratic process for determining national policies (Selove, 1995: 237-238).

The perils and irony of "friction-free capitalism"

Cybervisionaries such as Microsoft chairman Bill Gates have waxed ecstatic in describing the coming wonders of Internet-enabled "friction-free capitalism." In The Road Ahead, Gates (1995: 181) writes that: "We'll find ourselves in a new world of lower friction, lower overhead capitalism, in which market information will be plentiful and transaction costs low. It will be a shopper's heaven."

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In Gates' view capitalism will become low-friction when market information is "plentiful." But early indications are that the kind of information that is becoming available, and its distribution, both reflect biases of social power and wealth. In a general way, information pertinent to buying and selling is becoming more accessible to both producers and consumers. But access to other kinds of information continues to reflect distinct power asymmetries. For instance, businesses are electronically assembling statistical profiles on the performance of individual employees and personal consumer habits as never before. In contrast, worker and citizen abilities to penetrate the veils of corporate managerial secrecy and proprietary information are not remotely keeping pace. Corporations and financial institutions can snoop into your life in ways that you most definitely cannot snoop back (Guerinsey, 1999; Garfinkel, 2000; Tedeschi, 2000b).

The implications for open and informed democratic deliberation are not cheering. The proprietary nature of corporate strategic planning decisions puts governments, workers, and citizens several years behind businesses, in terms of access to information about impending, socially consequential innovations. Businesses can use their inside information to devise and deploy technological or social "facts accomplis," or to lobby government, long before anyone else even knows what's afoot (Sclove, 1995: 210, 276–277 n.42). This looks less like friction-free capitalism and more like information-free politics—ironic in a self-styled "Information Society."

Moreover, the economic historian Karl Polanyi, in his classic book *The Great Transformation*, argued compellingly that whenever conditions have approximated the ideal of friction-free, self-regulating markets, the consequences have proven calamitous:

To allow the market mechanism to be sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment... would result in the demolition of society. ...Robbed of the protective covering of cultural institutions, human beings would perish from the effects of social exposure... Nature would be reduced to its elements, neighborhoods and landscapes defiled... [N]o society could stand the effects of such a system. (Polanyi, 1957: 73)

Polanyi showed, in particular, how the subjection of human labor to unregulated market imperatives produced horrendous social and economic hardship during the centuries in which Britain became an industrial powerhouse. His insights are absolutely pertinent today. Contemporary capitalism is only humanly tolerable to the extent that a combination of inefficiencies and social regulations protect people and the natural world from the relentless hyperexploitation that friction-free capitalism would otherwise enact.

Initial glimpses of the inhumane results of electronically enabled capitalism are already well in evidence. As new technologies disengage jobs from factories, offices, and other specific work locations and from traditional daily rhythms, the work lives of millions are accelerating out of control (Robinson and Godbey, 1997: 38–42; Schor, 1997; Harmon, 1998). Social occasions and family meals are increasingly interrupted by cell phone calls and pager signals. Commuter automobiles and airline seats are reconfigured as mobile offices, as we take up lives of multitasking. Bill Gates (1999) unsentimentally encapsulates the frenzied zeitgeist in his latest book title, *Business @ the Speed of Thought.*

**Virtual community as coercive compensation**

At first glance, it might appear that the benefits of electronic "virtual communities" will offset the destructive civic impacts of electronic commerce run amok. Communities based on electronic communications, such as e-mail or electronic chat rooms, unquestionably have social merit. They can, for example, prove a liberating boon to people with physical disabilities. They also offer us a chance to link up with others who share our obscure passions and hobbies. Virtual communities thus seem unproblematic, indeed commendable—if joining them is a free choice. But will that choice remain free?

Imagine, for example, increasing numbers of workers telecommuting from home at odd hours of the day or night, the electronic erosion of local economies, and ever more people voluntarily spending time participating in electronic communities. You might just find, when you do want to hang out with family or friends or just stroll down to a local gathering spot, that no one else is around. For one reason or another, they're all online. So, whether you like it or not, you too have to log on to a virtual social life.

Like the Cybernetic Wal-Mart Effect, this turn to virtual communities can potentially exhibit a pathological social logic that I call "coercive compensation." Initial adoption of such a technology erodes a prior social practice or way of life, compelling more people to adopt the new technology not by choice but by default, as compensation. But this only aggravates the initial dynamic. Thus without anyone necessarily realizing it, the new technology is laterally responsible for eliminating the desirable way of life for which it is ostensibly compensatory. And yet we may cling to, identify with, and even vigorously defend the very technology that is the ultimate source of our pain.

Once a society is gripped by this coercive logic, how different will we be from the infamous drunk in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* (1943: 42–43), who guzzled booze because he wanted to forget. Forget what? Why, that he was ashamed of drinking! In the updated version:

Little Prince: "Why do you spend so much time online?"
Cyberman: "In order to shop! For companionship. To be where the action is!"
Little Prince: "But wouldn't it sometimes be nice to stroll downtown for that?"
Cyberman: "Oh, no thank you. The Internet has already half-destroyed downtown. Now excuse me while I log back on."
The dynamics of coercive compensation can swiftly generate extreme outcomes in part because they incorporate what systems theorists call positive feedback loops. That is, the output of a process (some people opting to shop, work, or socialize online at times of their choosing) circles back into the original process as input (reduced face-to-face social activity), generating more output (more and more people compelled compulsorily to spend ever more time socializing online). A little generates more, more generates a lot more. Systems with positive feedback loops can easily burst limits and grow cancerously.  

Virtual apartheid

Internet users tend, in addition, to sort themselves out into like-minded enclaves. In its proper place, that is fine. But if time spent in homogeneous online chat rooms substitutes for mingling in face-to-face public spaces with diverse groups of people, democracy is, once again, in trouble. Democratic self-government is only possible if people from diverse backgrounds and ways of life know something about one another’s lives and develop some cross-cutting social bonds. So sorting ourselves into electronic interest groups may erode our capacity for forging fair and effective social compromises. Toward the extreme, such segregation could degenerate into a world of attack ads, scapegoating, and polarization—the kinds of social trends historically associated more closely with fascism and apartheid than with a robustly democratic civil society (Sunstein, 2001).

Moreover, cyberspace does not alter the reality that no matter how far our words and imaginations fly, our bodies remain anchored in physical locations. Indeed, all of our political jurisdictions are territorially defined—local, county, regional, national, and so forth. If cyberspace disengages our social bonds from geography, how will we find common ground on public school policies, services for the elderly, and public safety if we know nothing about our physical neighbors’ lives?

The loss of habitat for citizenship

Only a few years ago, cyberspace was a commerce-free zone. The prevailing ethos was that any commercial come–on whatsoever was intolerable. The occasional transgressor was instantaneously subject to vicious, retaliatory verbal attack. Today, of course, it is all but impossible to browse the World Wide Web without being bombarded by flashing animated advertisements, unsolicited commercial pop-up screens, smarmy requests for personal information, and “sticky” (hard-to-exit) websites. Even many “virtual communities” are sponsored by corporations and managed primarily to shape consumer wants and capture market share (Werry, 1999).

Or consider the New York Times, the United States’ de facto newspaper of record. The front page of a typical printed copy of the Times—I happen to love on hand, Friday, October 25, 2002—includes an imposing 243 square inches of news text, news headlines, and accompanying illustrations. At the very bottom of the page there is one minuscule advertisement (occupying 1/10th of a square inch of space), giving a telephone number for ordering home-delivery of the newspaper. Thus less than 1/10th of 1 percent of the printed Times’ front page is occupied by advertising. This page is a kind of national civic space, affording readers an opportunity to experience themselves as citizens, not consumers.

Now log on to the same day’s New York Times homepage on the World Wide Web. Compared with the front-page print version, the average article on the homepage has shriveled from 8.5 paragraphs down to a single-sentence teaser. There are eighteen commercial advertisements, each with an accompanying color graphic or logo. The upper left-hand corner, right next to the famous gothic-font New York Times logo, displays a graphical box with a Java-animated ad for an online employment service. (Yes, that’s the same boxed corner that in the Times’ printed version displays the motto “All the News That’s Fit to Print.”)

The Times has quietly banished that time-honored slogan from its homepage. Measured in square inches, the Times Web homepage is 16 percent advertising—an advertising-to-content ratio comparable to that of US prime-time commercial television. This is substantially commercial space, not civic space.

This commercial onslaught may itself weaken the social foundations of democratic citizenship. The latter does not demand that we each act on the basis of our higher, less–egoistic citizen–self all the time, or even most of the time. But it does demand that most of us exhibit our citizen–selves some of the time, and especially when important public decisions about the basic character of our society are at stake (Barber, 1984: xiv, 151). That can only happen if neither our consumer–selves nor worker–selves overpower and engulf our citizen–selves.

We must be able to function as other–regarding, democratic citizens during those critical moments when it counts (and to recognize when we confront such moments). But to do so, there is a certain minimum amount of space and time that we need in our lives to experience ourselves and others as something more than mere drudging workers, self-promoting careerists, or acquisitive consumers.

So, guess what happens if cyberspace continues to evolve into an ever–more compulsory, commercially dominated medium? From a societal point of view, the shared time and space, both online and off, in which to experience others as citizens appreciably contracts. And with that, our own propensities to exhibit civic virtues likewise shrink.

On being no place at once

Meanwhile, an ever–more compulsory cybernetic lifestyle threatens to accelerate life on the job and off, distract and fragment our moment–to–moment existence, and alienate us bodily and psychologically from our immediate physical environment. Some of us are already spread simultaneously so thin among so many places that we exist constantly in an emotional state of “being no place at
once.” In effect, attention deficit disorder is being upgraded from psychological impairment to societal norm. According to a leading scholarly study of how Americans use their time, recent stressful trends of this sort mean that “many Americans never experience anything fully, never live in the moment” (Robinson and Godfrey, 1997: 39).

That could cripple our capacity for committed personal relationships, as well as our willingness to act personally and politically to protect the environment (cf. Bowers 2000: 48–73). It’s also likely to challenge our patience with the necessarily slow pace of democratic deliberation, to reduce our experience of meaning in daily life, and - given all of the above - to impair our moral development and discourage our personal participation in civic affairs.

From an Eastern perspective, being-no-place-at-once is antithetical to the here-and-now, single-pointed attention and subtle awareness that Buddhists, for example, consider essential to clear vision, compassionate knowing, human emancipation, and enlightenment (Goldstein, 1976; Nhat Hanh, 1987). From a Western perspective, it offers a final example of how far removed society is from the classical democratic ideals of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Jefferson, John Stuart Mill, and John Dewey if it is ruled by a hyper-commercialized Internet. Independent moral judgment, civic obligation, democratic deliberation, self-government, and the common good atrophy. In their place, we find compulsion, power asymmetry, friction-free capitalism, and the commodification of just about everything.

**Inescapable, compulsory access**

Devising public policies to prevent or remedy such negative impacts, while still preserving the Internet’s notable social benefits, is not particularly difficult. But the odds are against such remedies actually being adopted anytime soon.

We would be wise, for example, to amend the guiding policy mantra of seeking “universal and affordable Internet access.” That slogan is advertised as an essential requirement for social equity. But those who stand to benefit most unequivocally from its promotion are not the poor or disadvantaged minorities. They are the corporations that hope to stake their fortunes on an infinitely expanding cybersphere. For example, Eric Schmidt, a recent CEO of software giant Novell, has praised the idea of federal subsidies to help low-income Americans purchase computers and Internet connections. But he also concedes: “This is all clearly self-serving at some level because all of us in the industry benefit by having more customers” (quoted in Lacey, 2000).

The likely outcome of enshrining universal access as an unqualified social good will be a world of inescapable, compulsory access, in which cherished offline modes of life become more expensive, less available, or in some cases extinct. At that point, lack of Internet access will constitute “deprivation.”

This poses a particularly poignant dilemma for low-income communities. As Internet access becomes functionally compulsory, tangible penalties will emerge and escalate steadily for the unwired. On the other hand, some working-class and low-income communities have preserved more vibrant face-to-face social networks than their more affluent neighbors. This amounts to an endangered reserve of social capital, an essential foundation for political efficacy and economic revitalization. Going online, especially if it entails coercion into using the Internet excessively, at the wrong times, or in the wrong ways, could destroy those vital community ties.

A preferable public policy for all of us might be “universally affordable, voluntary access to online and offline life” for the following reasons:

- “Voluntary,” because whether and when to go online should be protected as a matter of free and informed personal choice.
- “Offline” – as well as online – life, to underscore that it is as essential to ensure equitable accessibility to an immense variety of offline choices as to the Internet itself.

Unless offline life is protected as a set of viable, attractive options, the phrase “voluntary access” could gradually ring hollow. How would you feel about an interstate highway system that had plenty of roadways and on-ramps but no off-ramps? We need a cyberspace where the on-ramps are universally accessible without becoming compulsory, entailing that place-based settings are nurtured and protected so that they too remain “universally and affordably accessible.”

**Capturing benefits, limiting harm**

As for other policy remedies, the simplest way to hold electronic commerce in balance with local economies – and thus to limit the erosion of civic vitality and democratic self-governance – would be to place a modest tax on electronic commerce and mail-order catalog sales. Some of the revenue could, in turn, be rebated to localities to invest in rejuvenating local economies and civic life. The rationale for such a tax is simple and compelling: unlimited e-commerce poses fundamental social and political harms that are not reflected in market prices. Current public policy irrationally encourages a Cybernetic Wal-Mart Effect by exempting most out-of-state purchases from state and local sales tax (Selove, 2000).

The democratically damaging effects of excessive international monetary flows – which are currently at least several hundred times greater in financial terms than the international flow of goods and services – can in principle be limited by adopting a variant of the so-called Tobin tax. Proposed two decades ago by Nobel Prize winning economist James Tobin, the tax would levy a small charge on all international foreign exchange transactions. Tobin originally envisioned setting the levy at 0.5 to 1 percent, which he estimated would damp down short-run speculation and threats of capital flight, without adversely affecting long-range productive investments. As in the preceding case of an
e-commerce tax, a portion of the resulting tax revenue could be rebated to national governments or international civic institutions for reinvestment in local economies and activities supporting democratic civil society.

Taxing e-commerce and global financial exchanges would, of course, go against the prevailing US anti-tax ethos. But these proposed taxes differ from conventional income, property, or sales taxes in being targeted specifically to activities that will otherwise produce basic social and democratic harm. In that sense they are akin to “sin taxes” or “green taxes” – taxes targeted to reduce socially or environmentally harmful activity.

Like green taxes, these are also taxes that preserve and expand treasured and essential social options. Green taxes do so by helping to preserve non-renewable resources, clean air, clean water, parks and other green spaces, wilderness areas, fragile ecosystems, and endangered species. Analogously, the taxes that I espouse would help preserve personal choice and freedom, local economies, community vibrancy, face-to-face conviviality, civil society, and the tradition of democratic self-governance. (Indeed, if the revenue from these taxes were to grow appreciably, it would become practicable to offset them by reducing conventional sales, income or property tax rates.)

Stronger labor laws could protect workers from intrusive work surveillance, and reimburse them for the escalating number of hours now worked without additional pay, a trend exacerbated by email and other new technologies. Local communities could preserve time for face-to-face activities by reviving some version of the old “blue laws” – in effect, augmenting existing holiday and weekend time, during which large numbers of residents would be off work and free to participate in social and civic events. Communities could also time voluntary weekly “TV-free” and “computer-free” periods to coincide with some of the new vacation time.

A prohibition or tax on third-party advertising on the Internet would be a straightforward way to roll back commercialization and preserve habitat for citizenship. It sounds unthinkable – until you remember that less than a decade ago it was the idea of commercial advertising on the Internet that was unthinkable.

In addition, everyone deserves a direct say, or real effective representation, in the crucial processes of designing, evaluating, and governing the new telecommunications systems. New technologies are profoundly affecting daily life and the basic character of our political institutions – as much, say, as any amendment to the Constitution. Yet business, government, military, and university research leaders are normally the only players permitted to participate in technology policy-making at the national level. Those who pay for these technical innovations (that’s everybody through their tax dollars and consumer purchases) and those who are affected (which is also everybody) have, unless one happens to be in one of the privileged groups above, no effective representation in deciding these policies (Selove, 1998; McChesney, 1999: 119–185).

Conclusion

It’s time to bring due process, fairness, and much broader public participation into decisions regarding powerful new technologies. Businesses could be offered tax breaks for including representatives of affected public groups in their processes for conducting research, product design, and strategic planning. All government advisory boards for science and technology should include strong, diverse representation of public-interest groups, affected workers, and ordinary citizens. Congress and federal agencies could emulate governments around the world that have begun assembling panels of everyday citizens to cross-examine experts, deliberate among themselves, and then announce their own technology policy recommendations at a national press conference. Congress should also shift a small portion of federal research support to help researchers and community groups, working as full partners, to answer communities’ own most pressing questions. Empowered by such “community-based research,” citizens could much more easily participate in technology policy decisions (Selove, 1995: 205–230; Selove, 1996; Selove et al., 1998; Selove, 1999).

So yes, it is technically, economically, and socially possible to develop and use information technologies in humane, just, wise, and democratic ways. Of course, during the height of the Internet mania, the idea that such measures would seriously be considered seemed impossible. During those giddy and greedy, wild-eyed days of yore (1999–2000), voices of caution were simply laughed on to the sidelines. The subsequent collapse of the dot.com stock market bubble, followed by protracted economic recession and general stock market meltdown, has inflicted hardship on millions of workers and investors. But it also somewhat improves the odds on taking a more measured societal approach to the Internet’s ongoing evolution.

Still, overall the prospects for a more civically oriented development of cyberspace remain limited in the short run. Internet mania may have collapsed, but the nation’s infatuation with laissez-faire economics, our limited societal readiness or institutional capacity for examining technologies critically, and a decided pro-Internet bias of the media all endure. (Media outlets of all kinds have a considerable financial stake in the Internet and the success of e-commerce.) Politicians and regulators remain subject to substantial pressure to make sure technology policies back corporate visions – and little pressured indeed to attend to the democratic or social repercussions.

That doesn’t provide much ground for immediate optimism. Nevertheless, there are important fall-back steps that can be taken now to reduce, and one day reverse, Internet-induced social and civic harm. Wise communities, for example, will act now to protect their local economies from the Internet’s encroachment. The practical beauty of seeking greater local economic self-reliance is that any county, city, or neighborhood can pursue it, and no permission is necessary from state or national governments. Successful examples abound. As of 1996, for example, there were 450 community-supported organic farms in the United
States (up from just two only ten years earlier); more than 2,000 community
development corporations; 10,000 worker-owned companies (up from 1,600 in
1974); and 47,000 consumer, housing, and other co-ops (Alperovitz, 1996; see
The self-designated “slow food movement” (www.slowfood.com) is a modest
but heartening example of a bottom-up, international endeavor to combat the
relentless fragmentation and speed-up of the pace of life.

Local communities can’t, acting by themselves, do much to prevent nation-
wide or global over-wiring. But residents can organize at the local level to
prevent some of the locally experienced ill effects. For example, one can coun-
terpose community networking, neighborhood telecommuting- and- civic centers,
and responsible voluntary Internet uses versus the export of scarce local dollars
to far-flung cybershops and coercively compensatory uses (Schuler, 2001). Or
counterpose child-centric versus computer-centric school curricula (Cordes
which aspects of face-to-face, place-based life they most treasure, and then make
vigorous efforts to enhance and protect what they treasure from the predatory
ravages of a rampant-ly over-commercialized Internet and over-wired world.

Meanwhile, some subsidiary battles related to the policies I have suggested
may well be winnable, even now. For instance, some state, county, and local
governments support taxes on e-commerce to protect local services from a
xeric mas loss of revenue. They could prove strong allies in lobbying for taxes on
online sales (e.g. Associated Press, 2000; Hardesty, 2001a). Deployed judiciously,
the Internet itself can be of assistance: many non-profit organizations, grass-
roots groups, and trade unions are using the Net to co-ordinate their actions
with one another, providing some countermouse to global corporate hyperem-
powerment.11

Later, when the novelty of our over-wired lives wears thin, advocating for
more sensible Internet policies will prove less lonely. The challenge then will be
to restore or reinvent opportunities for a vibrant, place-based social and civic
life. At that point, a clearly aware, organized political base will be essential to
insist upon change and to help design and implement it. The time to begin
building that base is now, and the obvious means is to fight right now for sensible
policies, despite the odds against immediate sweeping success. Even efforts that
fail will raise public awareness of the technological and social choices before us.

In the long term, history provides reason for hope. Consider Copenhagen.
Denmark initially overdid on automobiles in much the same way as the
United States. Photographs of downtown Copenhagen in the early 1960s show
all the old-time plazas converted into open-air parking lots, all the streets choked
with traffic. But the Danes came to their senses and gradually began taking
their streets and plazas back from the car. Today Copenhagen - and every city
and town in Denmark - has a car-free, downtown pedestrian area (Gehl and
Gimnza, 1996). There’s a lesson here. We human beings do sometimes get carried
away with our technical virtuosity. But we can be just as socially creative in
correcting our errors - when we’re ready. In the case of the Internet, the sooner,
the better.

Notes
1 This is an abridged version of a longer study. For comments on earlier drafts and
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Larry Kirkman, Howard Rheingold, Douglas Schuler, and Marcie Selove. Colleen
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and the Menemsha Fund.
2 Critical perspectives on the US Telecommunications Policy Act of 1996 include,
for example, Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility, 2001; and the
Benton Foundation, 1997. On public-interest group concern with unequal social
access to the Internet see, for example, the Digital Divide Network website at
3 The importance of a robust civil society is discussed in Wolfe, 1989; Skocpol and
5 Holstein et al., 1990. See also Mander and Goldsmith, 1996.
6 This is a point overlooked by measured techno-optimists, such as Mitchell, 1999,
e.g. pp. 72–73, 90–91.
8 US “blue laws” formerly restricted or prohibited various kinds of commercial
activity on Sundays. “All 50 [US] states had such laws . . . as late as 1961; by 1996,
only 13 did” (Lagere, 1998: 67). The revived blue laws I envision would carve
out new, shared free (including e-commerce) time on a weekly basis, not
necessarily on Sundays. E.g. establishing work-free and commerce-free time one or
two weekday evenings each week might be critically helpful.
9 The non-profit TV-Turnoff Network http://www.tvfina.org/ has set a precedent in
successfully sponsoring annual, voluntary one-week moratoria on TV-watching
in communities across the United States, as well as other programs to promote
reduced hours of television-watching.
10 Regarding the United States’ “limited institutional capacity” for examining
technologies critically, it does not help that a Republican-dominated Congress
abolished the Congress’s own 23-year-old Office of Technology Assessment in
1995 (Bimber and Guston, 1997).
11 For information on trade union use of the Internet see, for example, Turner, 2000.