

William Galston: I want to begin by saying that to some extent I’m here under false pretenses, and it’s important to dispel them. I probably know less about this topic than anyone else before you. I am not an Internet scholar by any stretch of the imagination.

I have done a little bit of thinking about the question from the standpoint of social theory, and what I’d like to do is use the intellectual resources of social theory backed by a certain amount of empirical social analysis to describe a problem that it seems to me the Internet is leading to. And then, rather than leaving you with a gloomy prognostication, to suggest a possible way forward.

I’m going to proceed very quickly, in very broad brushstrokes in the interest of time. I will present conclusions without evidence and without argument, and if you are interested there is going to be a question-and-answer period.

Let me sketch the theoretical basis for my concern. The first step in the argument is to say that during the past two generations, unfettered individual choice has become an increasingly dominant norm in American culture. And this is a development with consequences. In particular, as individual choice becomes more central in our lives, social bonds tend to weaken. This is a familiar point of empirical sociology as well as sociological theory, and there are reasons to believe that it is an important truth about contemporary American society.

We may, as theorists and as citizens, deplore this development, but the problems are not really problems of external judgment. They’re also problems for our internal lives as we lead them as individuals.

The reason is this. Despite the manifest attractions of individual choice, the desire for meaningful attachments is a permanent feature of the human condition because of the kind of beings that we are. We will never be satisfied with a world in which attachments are weak, unsatisfying and even evanescent.

How do we try to square the circle between our holding fast to the norm of unfettered choice as perhaps the central animating norm of modern life on the one hand, and on the other hand our desire for social bonds?

I suggest that the effort to reconcile these two competing imperatives gives rise to a preference for a mode of association that I will call “voluntary community.” Voluntary community, as I understand it, has three defining conditions. First, entry is by choice. Second, barriers to exit are low. And third, intracommunity relations are shaped through mutual adjustment rather than through authority or coercion.

Sounds great. But, and this is one of the turning points in my presentation, despite the obvious attractions of voluntary community as a way of apparently squaring this circle – you get both choice and social attachments – its rise, I believe, intensifies a range of existing social problems.

I want to pick out just one, namely the tendency of voluntary communities to organize around a narrow range of interests in which, and about which, the members of the community are in broad agreement. Let me make it very clear that I have no objection whatever to many of the focused associations that the Internet so obviously facilitates. Quite the reverse. Groups organized around specific diseases provide important

emotional support and the rapid location and sharing of information about promising new therapies.

Similarly, groups can form around shared hobbies, and the Internet makes possible interactivities that transcend previous barriers of space and time. My point is only that in the contemporary social domain, single-interest organizations, whatever the interest may be, are deeply problematic.

And here is why. Voluntary communities tend to be homogeneous. When given a choice, most people tend to associate with others who are like themselves in the respects that they regard as important. Above a relatively low threshold, most people experience deep difference as dissonant and unpleasant. Even when these differences need not be reconciled through explicit collective decisions, they suffuse the shared social space and reduce its appeal for many of its denizens.

To be sure, many people experience differences of food, of culture, and even opinion as stimulating, so long as they can sample them and leave when they choose. For most people, in short, diversity is a nice place to visit, but they don't really want to live there.

Now, because Internet communities are voluntary communities, they are more likely to be homogeneous rather than heterogeneous. And group homogeneity can have negative consequences for society as a whole. If I had more time, I would go on to discuss a series of important papers that have talked, both theoretically and empirically, about the tendency of voluntary communities to be homogeneous communities. And the problem with homogeneity is that not only does it tend to create groups that are sealed off from one another, but there are well-known social-science findings to the effect that homogeneous communities tend to intensify agreement within the community around more and more extreme forms of the agreement than brought the members together in the first place.

Why is this a problem? My answer is that it is a problem because it is a problem for democracy. A vibrant civil space, to quote the animating phrase from this panel, is not just a place where different groups can engage in parallel play. A vibrant civil space is a place where meaningful dialogue, deliberation and decision-making take place across lines of deep difference. And so, a form of civil organizing that rounds up the usual suspects, that is very confident that it knows the difference between the good guys and the bad guys, is one that does not expand democratic deliberation and debate. It is one that narrows democratic deliberation and debate by defining a perimeter of like-mindedness as the perimeter within which discussion and information-acquisition is going to take place.

That, I submit, is not good for democracy.

What can we do about this? My argument, which I only have time to state, is that the architecture of the Internet is more egalitarian than it is democratic, if by democratic one means deliberative. It turns out that the architecture of the Internet is better suited for customer-style transactions than it is for democratic-style transactions.

What I want to suggest is that in order to turn the potential of this medium from a customer market model to a democratic model, it will be necessary through deliberative action to change the architecture that *leased a portion of this space that this medium creates.

Some colleagues of mine at the University of Maryland -- Peter Levine and Robert Walkright, in cooperation with scholars such as Harry Boyt from the University of Minnesota and *Lou Freedman from the University of Wisconsin – with a grant from the Ford Foundation are engaged in a project whose enterprise is to create what they are calling a public telecommunication service. One of the major functions of this public telecommunications service would be to define the parameters of a new domain, a dot-civ domain, that not only would be organized and run democratically, but whose internal rules and practices would be specifically designed to break through the boundaries that too often bring together hermetically sealed groups of the like-minded; and to foster robust democratic deliberation, debate and decision-making across lines of deep difference, because rounding up the usual suspects is not the path to a vibrant democracy.

Thank you very much.

Tuckman: Bill, in this period of exploring this concept of democracy a bit further, we often hear the nonprofit sector both defended and lauded in terms of its representativeness of individual groups. When you go abroad and people talk about the nonprofit sector, particularly in countries like China where this is a difficult goal to achieve, we see envy of the fact that the third sector gives voice to many, many dissident opinions. Why wouldn't the Internet simply be an expansion of that? What is there magic about that vibrant space that would alter the role that the nonprofit sector plays now?

Galston: Giving voice to the voiceless is a necessary condition for democracy, but not a sufficient condition for democracy. I guess that's the basic point I'm trying to make. If you are functioning in a very, very repressive society, where many of the voiceless have no outlet, then the Internet is a tremendous step forward toward democracy, and the envy of civic-minded people and democratic activists in China for the United States civil society, including our free access to the Internet is entirely understandable in those circumstances.

But I think the mistake that we make is to believe that if we have empowered groups to speak, we have done everything that is necessary in order to build a vibrant civil space for democracy. If we have not attended to the organization of speech in such a way that genuine debate occurs across differences, then we have not, in my judgment, arranged the constitutional architecture of information and debate in a very democratic way.

To put it slightly differently, there was in the 1950s a theory of political pluralism that was sort of a baseline when I was a graduate student. And that is, you have all these different special-interest groups – in the 1950s they were thought to be organized around economic interests – and out of the collision of those groups, through a process of mutual adjustment, you will get a result and that result will be democratic.

Well, there is something missing from that vision of pluralistic interest-group adjustment. In my judgment, it does not get to be a more adequate theory of democracy if you simply add nonprofit advocacy groups to the mix. You may redress an imbalance in the pluralist system, but you do not create democratic debate as those of us who think about democratic theory understand it.

Tuckman: Thank you. I have a suspicion we'll want to come back to some of those ideas.