

## 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 instead 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 the widespread denial of access to food and, as a result, mass starvation. In China's famine of the late 1950s, for example, about thirty 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 instead to economic development? Actually these are foolish questions. Consider the remarkable 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.<sup>4</sup> Sen's starting point, 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 famine 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 when officials are thus pressured, they respond. But a system without a democratic press or free elections is likely to enable government to escape public accountability 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 serve people's interests. This lesson suggests some of the virtues not only for liberty but also economic development of having freedom of speech.<sup>5</sup> And this lesson indicates the immense importance for liberty and well-being of the Internet itself, which is making it possible for countless people to learn about social and economic problems, and 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, and partly to insulate their leaders from scrutiny and criticism, and potentially rebellion. Knowledge is the great ally of both freedom and welfare.

On this count, social media are particularly important. If public officials are engaging in repression in a local city, you can use Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram to get the news out immediately. Individual citizens can serve as reporters. They can expose misconduct, corruption, or suffering—and increase the likelihood that something will be done about it. During the Arab Spring, one Egyptian protester tweeted, “We use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world.”<sup>3</sup> Social media publicize developments in real time, and they let the world know what is happening. Sometimes Facebook and Twitter are the best places to look if you want to know about some disaster, discovery, or coup.

But what may be most interesting for present purposes is the fact that once some people have the relevant knowledge (for instance, that 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, as a result of this process, are protected from starvation and death, do not themselves choose in advance to learn about famines and related government policies.

An example from China may be useful here. In 2011, two highspeed trains crashed. The government apparently tried to cover up the accident, including by burying one of the cars on-site. An outpouring of posts on Weibo (China’s version of Twitter) criticized the government for the attempted cover-up, pressured the government to unearth the train and send it for analysis, and by posting Prime Minister Wen Jiabao’s official activities, disputed his claim that he did not visit the site because he was sick. The posts also prompted a surge in blood donations for the 40 people killed and 191 people injured.<sup>4</sup>

Many of the beneficiaries of democracy take little, if any, direct advantage of social media or even democratic elections. (A lot of people do not vote.) But it is not necessary that they do so in order for the system to work. When some people know about coming problems, they can speak out. In world history, one 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 in 2005 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.

## SHARED EXPERIENCES

Thus far I have focused on the social problems that would result from a fragmented communications universe. Let us now turn to two different points. The first involves the social benefits of a situation in which many people in a heterogeneous nation have a number of common experiences. The second involves the fact that once one person has information, it tends to spread and hence benefit others. A well-functioning system of free expression is difficult to understand without reference to these points.

Many private and public benefits come from shared experiences and knowledge as well as a sense of shared tasks. People are well aware of this, and they act accordingly.

People may watch what they watch or do what they do largely because other people are watching or doing the same thing. (The immense popularity of the Harry Potter books and the *Star Wars* movies has a lot to do with that fact.) But when the number of communications options grows dramatically, people will naturally make increasingly diverse choices, and their shared experiences, plentiful in a time of general-interest intermediaries, will decrease accordingly. This can erode the kind of social glue that is provided by shared experiences, knowledge, and tasks.

Consider in this regard an instructive discussion of Israel's one-channel policy—ensuring, for a long period of time, that television “controlled by the Broadcasting Authority was the only show in town.”<sup>5</sup> From the standpoint of democracy, any such policy obviously seems troublesome and indeed unacceptable. A free society certainly does not have a one-channel policy. But what is less obvious and more interesting are some unintended consequences of that policy: within two years of its inauguration, “almost everybody watched almost everything on the one monopolistic channel.... Moreover, the shared experience of viewing often made for conversation across ideological lines.... [T]he shared central space of television news and public affairs constituted a virtual town meeting.”<sup>6</sup>

One lesson is that a democracy “may be enhanced, rather than impeded, by gathering its citizens in a single public space set aside for receiving and discussing reliable reports on the issues of the day.”<sup>7</sup> It is not necessary to think that a one-channel policy is good or even tolerable in order to recognize that shared viewing, supplying common experiences for most or all people, can be extremely valuable from the democratic point of view. The central reason is that it promotes democratic discussion and might well promote better solutions from public officials.

There is a connected point. Information has a special property: when any one of us learns something, other people, and perhaps many other people, might end up benefiting from what we have learned. If you find out about crime in the neighborhood or risks associated with certain foods, others will gain from that knowledge. In a system with general-interest intermediaries, many of us come across information from which we may not substantially benefit as individuals, but that we nevertheless spread to others. Society as a whole is much better off as a result. As we have seen, a system in which individuals can design their own communications universe threatens to undermine this salutary process, not only because of the risk of spreading false information via cybercascades, but also because the situation of fragmentation prevents true (and valuable) information from spreading as much as it should.

## SOLIDARITY GOODS

Most people understand the importance of common experiences, and many of our practices reflect a firm sense of the point. National holidays help constitute a nation by encouraging citizens to think, all at once, about events of shared significance. And they do much more than this. They enable people, in all their diversity, to have some common memories and concerns.

At least this is true in nations where national holidays have a vivid and concrete meaning, as they do, for example, in younger democracies such as South Africa, India, and Israel. In the United States, many national holidays have become mere days-off-

from-work, and the precipitating occasion for the day off—President’s Day, Memorial Day, or Labor Day—has lost its salience; we seem to have forgotten our history, along with the struggles and celebrations that gave rise to the holidays themselves. This is a serious loss.

With the partial exception of the Fourth of July, Martin Luther King Jr. Day is probably the closest thing to a genuinely substantive national holiday in the United States, largely because that celebration involves not-ancient events that can be treated as concrete and meaningful. In other words, the holiday is *about* something. A shared celebration of a holiday with a clear meaning helps to constitute a nation and bring diverse citizens together. September 11 is a day of mourning, and hardly a holiday, but it is a time for national remembrance and reflection, and that is immensely important.

Nor need such events be limited to nations. One of the great values of the Olympics is its international quality, allowing people from different countries to form bonds of commonality, both directly through participation by athletes, and indirectly through shared viewing and interest. Of course the Olympics is also a vehicle for crude forms of nationalism. But at its best, the governing ethos is cosmopolitan in spirit.

Communications and the media are exceptionally important here. Sometimes millions of people follow an election, a sporting event, a release of a movie, or the coronation of a new monarch, and many of them do so because of the simultaneous actions of others. In this sense, some of the experiences made possible by modern technologies are *solidarity goods*—their value goes up when and because many other people are enjoying or consuming them. As Edna Ullmann-Margalit has shown, people often enjoy “solidarity in consumption.”<sup>28</sup> The point very much bears on the historic role of both public forums and general-interest intermediaries. Street corners and public parks were and remain places where diverse people can congregate and see one another. General-interest intermediaries, if they are operating properly, give many people, all at once, a clear sense of social problems and tasks.

Why might these shared experiences be so desirable or important? There are three principal reasons.

1. Simple enjoyment may not be the most important thing, but it is far from irrelevant. Often people *like* many experiences—including experiences associated with television, radio, and the Internet—simply because those experiences are being shared. Consider a new *Star Wars* movie, the Super Bowl, or a presidential debate. For some of us, these are goods that are worth less, and possibly worthless, if many others are not enjoying or purchasing them too. Hence for many people, a presidential debate may be worthy of individual attention in part because so many other people consider it worthy of individual attention.
2. Sometimes shared experiences help to promote and ease social interactions, permitting people to recognize and speak with one another, and congregate around a common topic, issue, task, or concern, whether or not they have much in common. In this sense shared experiences provide a form of *social glue*. They help make it possible for diverse people to believe—to know—that they

live in the same culture. Indeed, they help constitute that shared culture simply by creating common memories and experiences and a sense of a common enterprise. Most of the time, this benefit is relatively modest. But it can also help to connect people in difficult times, as when the economy is in terrible condition or the nation faces a threat to its security.

3. A fortunate consequence of shared experiences—and in particular, many of those produced by general-interest intermediaries—is that people who would otherwise see one another as quite unfamiliar, in extreme cases as nearly belonging to a different species, can come instead to regard one another as fellow citizens with shared hopes, goals, and concerns. This is a subjective good—felt and perceived as a good—for those directly involved. But it can be an objective good as well, especially if it leads to cooperative projects of various kinds. When people learn about a disaster faced by fellow citizens, for example, they may respond with financial and other help. In the aftermath of the attacks of 9/11, Americans did exactly that, and saw one another, to a greater and deeper extent, as involved in a common enterprise. The point applies internationally as well as domestically; massive relief efforts are frequently made possible by virtue of the fact that millions of people learn, all at once, about the relevant need.

Any well-functioning society depends on relationships of trust and reciprocity, in which people see their fellow citizens as potential allies, willing to help and deserving of help when help is needed. The level, or stock, of these relationships sometimes goes by the name of “social capital.”<sup>32</sup> We might generalize the points made thus far by suggesting that shared experiences, emphatically including those made possible by the system of communications, contribute to desirable relationships among citizens, even strangers. A society without such experiences will inevitably suffer a decline in those relationships.

### **FEWER SHARED EXPERIENCES**

Even in a nation of unlimited communications options, some events, such as a serious terrorist attack, will inevitably attract widespread attention. On the Internet itself, some sites, such as [newyorktimes.com](http://newyorktimes.com) and [wallstreetjournal.com](http://wallstreetjournal.com), 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 groups will share fewer reference points. Events that are highly salient to some people will barely register on others' viewscreens. And it is possible that some views and perspectives that seem obvious for many people will be barely intelligible for others.

One more time: 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. No one suggests that everyone should, or 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 Supreme Court 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 a system of communications.

## CONSUMERS AND PRODUCERS

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. Because the barriers to communication are far lower online, interested 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 about World War II, you might be more likely to go see that movie. Consumers themselves can band together, across geographic lines, to ensure that they do or watch the same thing.

In this way, current communications technologies can promote shared experiences, even among people who do not know each other or who would not otherwise think of one another as group members. With Facebook, millions or even hundreds of millions of people are able to have shared experiences. But even so, it can be less likely for large numbers of people to coordinate around a single option, simply because the array of options is so dazzlingly large. This point is enough to suggest the basis for my general concern.

It is true that producers of information have strong incentives to get people to coordinate around a shared experience. They might themselves emphasize, for instance, that most people, or most people like you, will be watching a television show dealing with crime in the area or 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 degree 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-on 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 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 benefit 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 unlikely to consider the harms they impose on others. Acting on their own, people are unlikely 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 whether employers are discriminating on the basis of sex, you are usually not 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—which in the context of pollution and national defense, are addressed through government programs designed to overcome the predictable problems that would come from relying entirely on individual choices. With the decline of general-interest intermediaries, we may need to think similarly about how to address market failures in our communications system.

No one ever planned this, but when they work well, general-interest intermediaries provide an excellent corrective. 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 friend whose son has asthma. Perhaps you are not much interested in traffic safety risks, but once you learn about the hazards associated with texting while driving, you might be

reinforced in your desire not to text while driving, 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.

I am certainly not arguing that from the point of view of dissemination of information, it would be better to abolish the Internet and rely on a system dominated by a few general-interest intermediaries. Nothing could be further from the truth. As we have seen, current 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. Social media are a terrific boon on that count. 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**

Let's now return to 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 instead as a metaphor for countless situations in which a democratic government averts social problems precisely because political pressure forces it to do so. The underlying problems often involve crime, pollution, natural disasters, employment opportunities, health risks, medical advances, political candidates, or 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.

Current technologies have 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 and even the entire world. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat can easily be used for that purpose. 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 simply 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 LONG TAILS**

In an illuminating and instructive book, Chris Anderson celebrates niches and niche marketing, seeing them as an extraordinary development made possible by the

Internet.<sup>42</sup> To simplify his story, Anderson argues that companies can and do make increasing amounts of money by catering to niche markets through a large volume of products (books a la [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com) or movies a la Netflix). Few people buy many of these products. At a bookstore, 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](http://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 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 high. “Niche” is a key word in Anderson’s argument.

Anderson makes a valuable point. He 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. But it is also important to see what might be wrong with a world of niches. The power to choose the particular good that each particular person particularly wants is not an unambiguous good; there is more to do than 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 it is appropriate to celebrate the increase in available options, but from the standpoint of democracy, the assessment is not so simple.

The reluctance to raise questions about the proliferation of niches is characteristic of a great deal of thinking about the Internet and social media, even among their most creative and sharpest analysts. Indeed, we might go further. Many of those who know most about the underlying technology and 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 choose what they like. The commitments to free markets and 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 longtime professor at the University of Chicago, where I taught from 1981 until 2007, 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.

The risk is that the proliferation of niches will harm aspects of our shared culture and also promote fragmentation, especially along political lines. It is not enough to rest content with general observations about how a good 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. Perhaps they reflect some kind of left-of-center consensus. Perhaps they refuse to take on the status quo. Perhaps they pander to ratings and the bottom line at the expense of

real news. Perhaps they simply reflect a pale, watered-down version of the dense reality of what people actually think (the “lamestream media”). Perhaps the mass media are simply not in touch with people’s struggles and concerns.

Many people think that the mass media are hopelessly superficial, even sensationalistic, obsessed with reporting on who said the latest mean or cruel thing, who’s fighting with whom, or crimes and celebrities and sound bites. (In the 2016 presidential campaign, of course, Trump’s insults were inevitably big news.) Still others think that general-interest intermediaries are inevitably few in number, and hence that they produce a stifling degree of homogeneity. “Let millions or even billions speak in their own authentic voice,” they say. Or, “Here comes everybody.” 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 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?

It would hardly be desirable for a few newspapers and broadcasters to dominate the scene. With the Internet, the situation is definitely better, not worse. The social media are a great boon, not least because people can both receive so much information and get a lot of it out there. Nor do I claim that newspapers and broadcasters generally do an excellent or even 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.

We have seen that some of the most popular Internet sites work in a similar fashion to general-interest intermediaries. Indeed, they *are* general-interest intermediaries, performing the same functions online that they do on television or 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.

There is nonetheless a difference between an evening program or newspaper, which puts numerous stories before your eyes with at least a modicum of detail, and an Internet site, which may contain a visible headline or quick link to new topics, but that does not expose people in nearly the same way to diverse topics and points of view. I have a good friend (actually, it’s my wife) who insists on reading the daily newspaper in hard copy rather than online. The reason is exactly this: she wants to see, in front of her eyes, the full spread of stories on the various pages. She doesn’t want a situation in which she merely sees a menu of options and is authorized to click on what interests her. The opening paragraphs matter, and sometimes they grab her, and she wants them right in front of her eyes.

It is true and important that the most popular sites contain links, advertising, and multiple news stories. But concerns about self-insulation remain. And with personalization—by choosers or those who choose for them—the problem is compounded.

## THE NETWORKED PUBLIC SPHERE

The idea of the Daily Me points to the risk of social fragmentation. But precisely because time is limited, it has been possible to think that the Internet will not make all that much of a difference to how we get our information—that a few providers will pretty much dominate the Internet no less than they do television and radio. Online, attention is a highly 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 York Review of Books* and the *National Review* have significant but much smaller circulations, and they are read online in similar proportions. If we stress these points, continuing concentration, and not echo chambers, might seem to be the wave of the future. The basic tale is less one of change than of continuity, with differences of degree rather than kind.

What do we actually know about use of the Internet? A picture is already emerging, and I will be offering many more details. But let's begin with a careful and illuminating analysis, now dated but still unsurpassed, in which law professor Yochai Benkler describes and celebrates the "networked public sphere."<sup>13</sup>

Benkler shows that the prediction of continuity is essentially inconsistent with the current 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 different from that of the old mass media. In the networked public sphere, there are numerous voices, and what is seen or heard depends on how things emerge in relevant networks. A small voice can become a large one. In Benkler's words, "Clusters of moderately read sites provide platforms for vastly greater numbers of speakers than were heard in the massmedia environment."<sup>14</sup> Even if your site or blog has 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. We might even see a cascade. That's altogether different from anything that happened before.

Something of this kind happens online every day, and it works for those who run smaller websites as well. It works even more clearly with Facebook and Twitter. A tweet might get retweeted by one person with five thousand followers, and then by someone with twenty thousand followers, and then by someone with eight hundred thousand followers. To be sure, the real Internet does not operate as a system in which "everyone [is] a pamphleteer."<sup>15</sup> But it is genuinely new, simply because it has so many more voices, so much more information, and such broad participation, with overlapping and unpredictable networks, leading to cascade effects, and suddenly visible bits of information whose popularity no one could have foreseen.

Of course what emerges may be a perspective or formulation, rather than information as such; consider what makes things go viral on Twitter (for example, #BlackLivesMatter). Benkler wrote before the emergence of anything like the social media in their current form, but his argument works at least as well for the contemporary situation.

Like many others, Benkler insists that the networked public sphere is essentially 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 has considerable truth, but we have seen strong

reasons to question it, and we will see more. Indeed, his own evidence much 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.”<sup>44</sup> This has been precisely my concern here. Many people segregate themselves along lines of both topics and points of view. In Benkler’s own words, individuals “cluster around topical, organizational, or other common features,” and like-minded people “read each other and quote each other much more than ... the other side,” if only to sort out their internal disagreements.<sup>45</sup>

With social media, that is exactly what is happening. We have seen that on Twitter and Facebook, people definitely cluster, at least on some issues; they tend to circulate stories with which they agree. As we have also seen, an evident reason is confirmation bias: people are biased to like and to publicize opinions and information (real or apparent) that support what they think. Falsehoods spread rapidly, and to the extent that people are reading and speaking to like-minded others, group polarization is inevitable. It is a fact of life in the networked public sphere.<sup>46</sup>

In sum, the public sphere is definitely networked, and ideas in a tweet or blog post often bubble up to a larger group. But there is a lot of fragmentation, and for self-government, that can be a problem.

### **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, and 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 widely shared experiences and at the same time fails to confer some of the benefits 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 democratic ideals.