The Internet and Political Transformation: Populism, Community, and Accelerated Pluralism*

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The swift development of the Internet has inspired two sorts of claims that large-scale transformations in the structure of political influence in the U.S. are under way: the populist claim that the Internet will erode the influence of organized groups and political elites, and the community-building claim that the Internet will cause a restructuring of the nature of community and the foundations of social order. These claims are significant because they address not only the currently fashionable subject of the Internet but also fundamental questions about the causal role of communication in public life. A close evaluation of both claims suggests that the assumptions underlying them are improbable at best. I suggest an alternative model of "accelerated pluralism" in which the Internet contributes to the on-going fragmentation of the present system of interest-based group politics and a shift toward a more fluid, issue-based group politics with less institutional coherence.

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I. Introduction

The Internet has already acquired political significance, as increasing numbers of citizens use it to learn about government policies and actions, discuss issues with one another, contact elected officials, and obtain voter registration materials and other information that can facilitate more active participation in politics. All observers of the current scene agree that "the Net" is dramatically expanding access to politically relevant information and offering citizens new possibilities for political learning and action. Yet the burgeoning literature on the subject is riven with disagreement over a fundamental question: will the changes wrought by expanding use of the Net produce a qualitatively differ-

ent political system in the near future?

Many people believe that the answer is "yes." So noted an analyst of political power as Robert Dahl[1] has observed that telecommunications technologies have a key role in making possible the "advanced democratic country," where policy is firmly anchored in the judgments of the "demos." Dahl is hardly alone in pondering an affirmative answer to this question. Amitai Etzioni sees in the Internet the possibility of an advancement of the state of public affairs through "teledemocracy."[2] Technologist Mitchell Kapor claims the Net will "enable a Jeffersonian revolution."[3] Lawrence Grossman argues that a third great epoch of democracy is arriving by the hand of technology.[4] He claims that just as during the eighteenth century representative government transformed the direct democracy pioneered by the Greeks over two millennia ago, a new, hybrid "electronic republic" is now forming to displace the creation of Montesquieu, Locke, Madison and their contemporaries. Graeme Browning, like others, suggests that the practice of "electronic democracy" will differ significantly from the practice of past forms of democracy.[5] The grandest claim yet may be that of Nicholas Negroponte, who expects "the nation-state to evaporate" under the influence of new technologies.[6]

These claims are important not because they address a fashionable topic, but because they entail more fundamental claims about the role of communication in the structuring of political practice. The most important predictions about the Internet and politics amount to causal claims regarding the effect of information flow on political participation and the organization of interests. Some of the popular claims about the Internet, communication, and political change are inflated, even hyperbolic, but not all can be easily dismissed. The evolution of the Net is still in its infancy. The number of people using it in the U.S. has grown at a rate of 50% to 75% per year for several years, putting it on a path into American life like that traversed by radio in the 1920s and 1930s and television in the 1950s and 1960s. We know that those technologies, especially television, had profound implications for the structure of political influence and the nature of public life, and it is reasonable to assume that the Net will have equally strong implications.

1. Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University, 1989), 339.

2. Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities, and the Communitarian Agenda* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1993).

3. Quoted in John V. Pavlik, *New Media Technology: Cultural and Commercial Perspectives* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1996), 317.

4. Lawrence K. Grossman, *The Electronic Republic: Reshaping Democracy in America* (New York: Viking, 1995).

5. Graeme Browning, *Electronic Democracy: Using the Internet to Influence Politics* (Wilton, CT: Online Inc., 1996).

6. Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 165.

Even a cursory examination of the social history of technology makes quite clear that accurate prognostication about technology-induced social change is impossible in the absence of data and empirically based theory. Yet it is possible to evaluate competing claims about the political effects of the Net by carefully examining the logic upon which they rest.

Because such an undertaking involves assessing claims about the future, it must be in part speculative. In this article I bring to bear a range of theories and facts about American politics with the aim of making our theoretical understanding of the Net as a political phenomenon less speculative and more solidly theoretical. This will permit drawing attention to the underlying relationships between communication and politics implicit in these ideas about political change.

A decade ago, before the rise of the Internet as a political phenomenon, Abramson, Arterton, and Orren argued that the three central theoretical constructs relevant to electronic media are plebiscitary democracy, communitarianism, and pluralism.[7] Contemporary commentary on the Internet has echoed some of their claims and fits roughly within their categories, which I use as a starting point for my analysis. Here I focus on two current propositions about transformations in the structure of U.S. democracy: a populist claim that the Net is producing a resurgence of individual-level influence on government and politics, and a community-building claim that the Net will promote a recasting of community and the social relations that undergird public life. For each of these two claims, I first identify a coherent, central theoretical idea about cause and effect—a task often brushed aside in the gush of enthusiasm about the Net. Then I evaluate that idea by drawing on several intellectual traditions: the study of political participation, the study of political communication and the media, theorizing about public deliberation, and the history of telecommunication.

My finding is that there are many reasons to doubt the populist and community-building theories of political transformation. The conditions that would be required for the populist transformation fly in the face of fundamental facts about American political participation and the history of media and political communication in the U.S. The central theoretical problem for the populist claim is the absence of a clear link between increases in information and increases in popular political action. Causal claims underpinning the community-oriented theory of the Net are somewhat more difficult to judge against empirical evidence, but I conclude that our understanding of the content of social interaction on the Net gives little reason to think that community will be significantly enhanced on a large scale. Building community

7. Jeffrey B. Abramson, F. Christopher Arterton, and Gary R. Orren, *The Electronic Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

in a normatively rich sense is not the same as increasing the amount of social talk, and there is good reason to think the latter will be the norm on the Net.

After considering problems with the populist and community-based claims, I propose an alternative theory, which I call "accelerated pluralism." My claim is that, above all else, the Net is accelerating the process of issue group formation and action, leaving the structure of political power in the U.S. altered, but not revolutionized or qualitatively transformed into a new epoch or era of democracy. The most significant and interesting changes may be that processes of group-oriented politics will show less coherence and less correspondence with established private and public institutional structures. The main theoretical foundations for my claim concerns political cognition and the costs of collective action. I argue that at nearly every turn, the antici-pated effects of expanded communication are limited by the willingness and capacity of humans to engage in a complex political life. While the Net will certainly change the informational environment of individuals, it will likely not alter their overall interest in public affairs or their ability to assimilate and act on political information. One of the implications of my argument is that Marshall McLuhan's old dictum is wrong: the medium is *not* the whole mes-sage. Content matters, and there is simply no overwhelming reason to believe that a new medium will necessarily enhance the political quality of commu-nicative content.[8]

With that said, it must be noted that it is impossible to assert a general theory of the Internet and politics today, and to dismiss with absolute certainty any specific claims—even the populist and community-based theories that I criticize here. The last word on the Net will not be written for some time to come; the position I defend here is not intended to mean that every single political act on the Net will fall neatly into my category of accelerated plural-ism, or that counter-examples showing populism or community-building cannot be found. My aim is to lay bare in a systematic way some of the cen-tral assumptions and considerations at issue, to indicate the direction in which I see a preponderance of the evidence pointing right now, and to stimulate a more theoretically rich discourse about the Internet and politics.

Before beginning the discussion, a few observations about the claims that I am evaluating are in order. For many proponents, the possibility of more populism or enhanced community constitute both normative statements about the desirability of political change *and* empirical expectations about the future. I do not take up normative questions here. My interest is in assessing the logic and empirical basis for these theories, not evaluating desirability— an interesting topic that I leave for another place. I restrict myself to the U.S.

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8. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet, 1964).

case, for the simple reason that conditions vary so much across nations. An assessment of political transformation on an international scale is a task considerably beyond my scope here. It is also is important to note that the Net has implications for a wide range of political topics, from free speech to the structure of political institutions. While many of these matters are linked in some way to my topic, I have chosen here to set aside many interesting subjects in order to focus on theories involving changes in the basic structure of the polity, in the essential nature of citizen engagement in public affairs. Last, it should be noted that arguments about the Net and social change often skirt interesting problems in the philosophy and sociology of technology, particularly those concerning technological and economic determinism. I do not pursue those lines of inquiry here—many of which would entail accounting for the causes of the emergence of the Net—in favor of a focus directly on claims about the effects of the Net on politics and public life.[9]

II. Populism

Those who believe that the Net will restructure political power in a populist direction have articulated their claim in various ways. Daniel Weitzner of the Center for Democracy and Technology believes that the Net has a "transformative potential" because it facilitates a kind of "one-to-one interaction among citizens and between citizens and government" that he sees as missing in current politics.[10] Corrado and Firestone write that the Net might promote "unmediated" communication between citizens and government, and decrease citizens' reliance on elected officials, party organizations, and organized interest groups.[11] Grossman articulates the same idea: "The big losers in the present-day reshuffling and resurgence of public influence are the traditional institutions that have served as the main intermediaries between government and its citizens—the political parties, labor unions, civic associations, even the commentators and correspondents in the mainstream press."[12] Howard Rheingold, one of the most influential popular observers of the Net,

9. For overviews of philosophical and sociological accounts of technology in general, including work by the present author, see: Merritt Roe Smith and Leo Marx, eds., *Does Technology Drive History? The Dilemma of Technological Determinism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994); and Sheila Jasanoff, et al., eds., *Handbook of Science and Technology Studies* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995). For a brief discussion of technological determinism in the context of media and politics, see: Abramson, Arterton, and Orren, *The Electronic Commonwealth*.

10. Browning, *Electronic Democracy*, xi.

11. Anthony Corrado and Charles M. Firestone, eds., *Elections in Cyberspace: Toward a New Era in American Politics* (Washington, DC: Aspen Institute, 1996), 13.

12. Lawrence K. Grossman, *The Electronic Republic: Reshaping Democracy in the Information Age* (New York: Viking, 1995), 16.

has dubbed it "the great equalizer" because it can "equalize the balance of power between citizens and power barons."[13]

The idea here is that the Internet will serve a mass audience, and will politicize them in the process. Indeed, the long-term historical trend has been for new electronic media to contribute to the drift of American politics toward somewhat more plebiscitary democracy.[14] The media have fed the historical expansion in the base of democratic participation, the rise of referenda and initiatives, the primary, public opinion polls, and other apparatus of direct democracy. Enthusiasm for new claims about the Net is fueled in part by this long-standing affinity that Americans demonstrate for more direct forms of democracy; in this regard the new claims look much like the old claims about "televoting."[15]

What distinguishes the new populist enthusiasm for the Net is the additional idea that elites and political intermediaries will grow less important. In the populist vision not only will a mass audience be able to follow politics and express its views to government, but it will also be fundamentally less dependent on linkage organizations and group politics. The function of the Net, in this conception, is to facilitate a running national poll of public opinion, with immediate electronic feedback from citizens to government and vice versa—that is the plebiscitary element. Citizens will be less dependent on news organizations, interest groups, associations, unions, experts, government officials, and other elites to organize information, inform them, and mobilize participation—this is the populism of the idea. In its most extreme form, it is a vision of government by electronically facilitated survey, without the need at all for parties, interest groups, other interest aggregators, or professional political communicators.[16]

The best way to give this claim its due is to identify its central assertion in as straightforward a way as possible, in terms that allow us to assess it in light of current social science knowledge. That assertion can be framed quite simply: by increasing communication capacity, the Net will increase citizen influence on politics and decrease the influence of traditional political intermediaries who now dominate political communication. That is, *the greater the capacity of citizens to communicate directly with government, the more*

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13. Howard Rheingold, "The Great Equalizer," *Whole Earth Review* (Summer, 1991): 6.

14. Abramson, Arterton, and Orren, *The Electronic Commonwealth.*

15. See: Kenneth C. Laudon, *Communications Technology and Democratic Participation* (New York: Praeger, 1977); and F. Christopher Arterton, *Teledemocracy: Can Technology Protect Democracy?* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1987).

16. Some observers view "teledemocracy" as an adjunct to traditional means of representation and aggregation, rather than as outright replacements. See: James S. Fishkin, "Beyond Teledemocracy: 'America on the Line,'" *The Responsive Community* 2 (Summer, 1991):13-19, and David L. Kirp, "Two Cheers for the Electronic Town Hall: Or Ross Perot, Meet Alexis de Tocqueville," *The Responsive Community*, 2 (Fall 1992): 48-53.

likely they are to be engaged in politics, and the more engaged they are, the greater their direct influence as individuals.

Thus the core of the populist claim rests on the idea that communication capacity is a kind of rate-limiting factor in political engagement and influence. At present, resources for effective political communication are dominated by political professionals, interest groups, and other elites. The Net, in the populist view, will decentralize access to communication and information, increasing citizen access. Individuals' engagement in politics will increase, as will their influence. Carried far enough, this process produces the populist transformation. We can leave aside the impossible question of just *how far* the process would have to go before one would be justified in proclaiming that our group-oriented, pluralistic political system had been transformed into a populist one. Instead, it is sufficient to ask whether our knowledge of political behavior suggests that increased communication capacity has a causal connection to popular political engagement at all, and if so whether the direction of influence is as postulated. If so, then we have reason to believe that the populist claim may be on to something; if not, then it seems implausible, at least by this causal mechanism.

Both theory and empirical evidence cast grave doubt on the communication-action connection at the core of the populist theory. To begin, it is difficult to escape the observation that the populist hypothesis rests on a conception of social structure and the place of the individual in society that is far too thin, because it conceives of the citizen as chiefly an atomistic individual and society as simply a geographic boundary around a large number of such individuals. It is true that other media have indeed contributed toward the creation of an atomized mass audience, but when it comes to political behavior, citizens remain situated in an enormously complex and rich social web. As Huckfeldt and Sprague put it, "citizens live in neighborhoods, among immediate neighbors, located in the middle of larger neighborhoods, surrounded by a city, a county, a state, a region," and they exist within the constraints and influence of "workplaces, churches, taverns, bowling leagues, little leagues, health clubs, and so on."[17] What matters about all this social structure is that it shapes everything from people's conceptions of their own political interests, as V. O. Key demonstrated in the case of Southern whites, to the skills and abilities that people bring to the political arena.[18] Most importantly, the social environment creates patterns of association that can translate directly into

17. Robert Huckfeldt and John Sprague, *Citizens, Politics, and Social Communication: Information and Influence in an Election Campaign* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1995), 20.

18. V. O. Key, *Southern Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1949); Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1995).

political action.[19] This social structure intervenes between the individual and the state proper, not only bringing people together in groups and associations, but fragmenting society as a whole into collections of groups, associations, and communities. Whatever tendency the Net may have for furthering the development of the mass audience must confront this elaborate social structure.

More important for the question about a communication-action connection, though, is the *behavior* of the media audience—that is, the political behavior of the American public. After all, the central populist claim of interest here concerns changes in patterns of political action because of the Net, not the adjustments in the boundaries of audience groups and markets that have characterized the emergence of the mass media market in the U.S. For evidence about communication and behavior, we can look to the study of political participation.

If increases in communication capacity lead to increased political engagement, including voter participation, then presumably some indication of this connection would be evident in the U.S. already. After all, the rise of the Internet in the 1990s is not the first time that Americans have experienced an explosion in communication. During the second half or so of the twentieth century two developments dramatically expanded citizens' access to information: the expansion of education, and the growth of television. Formal education involves both the acquiring of information directly while in school and the development of skills for further acquisition of information and communication throughout life. Since the 1960s, the fraction of adults in the U.S. with four or more years of high school has doubled, and the fraction with four or more years of college has tripled.[20] The U.S. has become measurably more well educated. At roughly the same time, television burst into public life with extraordinary speed, revolutionizing the availability of political information to citizens. In 1950, about 9% of households had a television set, while in 1998 about 98% do. Telephone ownership, which also dramatically expanded the capacity of citizens to communicate, grew from 63% to 94% in the same period. By most measures, U.S. citizens have much more information-handling capacity now than a half-century ago, even before one factors in the Internet.

Yet there appears to be no connection between information and political engagement, as measured by knowledge about politics, voting, or sophistication. Our more well-educated, media-soaked public simply has not exhibited

19. Robert D. Putnam, "Bowling Alone, Revisited," *The Responsive Community* (Spring, 1995): 18-35; Robert D. Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy* 6 (1995): 65-78.

20. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1994* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1994).

any significant increase in knowledge about public affairs or any increase in electoral participation over the public of the 1950s.[21] They also show no increase in political sophistication.[22] These phenomena do not appear to be the result of any idiosyncrasies of the U.S. either, as they have been reported in Western European democracies also.[23]

Scholars still debate fundamental questions about political participation, such as why turnout has declined in recent decades, and what differentiates voters from non-voters in any given year. But one key fact does leap out from studies of political participation, namely that in the historical aggregate, increases in access to information about politics have not been connected with increased engagement.[24] There is no reason yet to reject Verba and Nie's contention nearly three decades ago that during the twentieth century the availability of information about politics has not been directly connected to the public's level of participation as a whole.[25] This is a striking and perhaps disheartening state of affairs for those who urge reinvigoration of public participation through increased access to information. Converse suggests that the situation is actually worse, arguing that the historically high voter turnout rates of the late nineteenth century were the result of low levels of information and the consequent susceptibility of voters to emotional appeals. If he is right, expanded information and decentralized communication may have depressed public participation.[26]

Though counter-intuitive at first glance, the lack of a positive information-to-action link for popular involvement in politics can be explained by the findings of political psychology and research on the media, political information, and issue publics. These traditions point to a nearly inescapable truth: the cognitive structure of the political individual limits will and capacity to assimi-

21. Samuel L. Popkin, *The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991).

22. Robert C. Luskin, "Explaining Political Sophistication," in *Controversies in Voting Behavior*, 3rd ed., ed. Richard G. Niemi and Herbert F. Weisberg (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 1993), 114-36; W. Russell Neuman, "Political Communications Infrastructure," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 546 (July, 1996): 9-21; Eric R. A. N. Smith, *The Unchanging American Voter* (Berkeley: University of California, 1989). While there is a debate about the level of sophistication of the American public, most researchers agree that there has been no increase in that level over time.

23. Richard S. Flickinger and Donley T. Studlar, "The Disappearing Voters? Exploring Declining Turnout in Western European Elections," *West European Politics* 15 (April, 1992): 1-16.

24. Matthew J. Burbank, "Explaining Contextual Effects on Vote Choice," *Political Behavior* 19 (1997): 113-32.

25. Sidney Verba and Norman Nie, *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

26. Philip E. Converse, "Change in the American Electorate" in *The Human Meaning of Social Change*, ed. Angus Campbell and Philip Converse (New York: Sage, 1972): 263-337.

late information systematically, and it focuses interest and attention on a few public issues to the near exclusion of others.[27] It is not simply the availability of information that structures engagement; it is human interest and capacity to understand many complex issues.[28] As Verba, Schlozman, and Brady write, people's participation in politics depends upon both capacity *and* motivation.[29] Citizens must want to participate, and they must have the capacity to do so. Neuman writes: "for the great majority of American citizens, knowledge about candidates and issues is driven more by interest than by information availability."[30] The Net clearly changes capacity and information availability; but it is not yet clear that it will also change motivation and interest, let alone cognitive capacity.

Walter Lippmann provides a classic account of this problem in *Public Opinion*.[31] There he argues that the optimistic image of informed citizens serving as majoritarian managers of public affairs is an impossibility, because it assumes what Lippmann calls "omnicompetent" individuals and assigns to the media the responsibility of carrying the water of representative government, industrial organization, diplomacy, and the rest of the central functions of state and civil society. Writing during the age of radio and newspapers, Lippmann argued that the media simply can not be charged with the duty of "translating the whole public life of mankind, so that every adult can arrive at an opinion on every moot topic."[32]

Lippmann's claim is that what now might be labeled "knowledge elites"— the rich fabric of associations, organizations, libraries, lobbies, bureaus and the like—are fundamentally necessary interpreters of the human context for democratic citizens who cannot successfully swim the rapids of information that surround them, even when inclined to make the attempt on their own. Put simply, there are just too many issues, too many decisions, too much complexity to expect citizens to inform themselves and seize the reins of government without the intercession of a vast, elaborate, human infrastructure of information-processors. Thus, Lippmann argues, the problem is not getting more information into the hands of citizens.

Lippmann's old argument, and much research since his time, shows what

27. Jon Krosnick, "Government Policy and Citizen Passion: A Study of Issue Publics in Contemporary America," *Political Behavior* 12 (March 1990): 59-92; W. Russell Neuman, *The Paradox of Mass Politics: Knowledge and Opinion in the American Electorate* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1986).

28. Benjamin I. Page, *Who Deliberates? Mass Media in Modern Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996).

29. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, *Civic Voluntarism*, 3

30. Neuman, "Political Communications Infrastructure."

31. Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Macmillan, 1934).

32. Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 362.

a rosy conception of democratic citizenship the populist theory assumes. In that conception, effective democracy requires well-informed, engaged citizens who have the capacity and interest to follow public issues and who participate regularly. In the populist model, the Net simply serves as a corrective, restoring democracy to its proper levels of citizen engagement in accordance with this ideal standard of citizenship—by democratizing the flow of information. The assumption driving this theory is that the sickness of democracy stems from control over information and communication by an elite stratum of political professionals—wrest control of information and communication from them and return it to the people, and the system corrects itself.

This conception of the logic and requisites of democracy does not fit the contemporary American public. It has probably never been accurate for the American democracy, or for any other historical democracy for that matter. In real democracies, participation and involvement are highly uneven, with large portions of the public quite inattentive to most issues and quite unsympathetic to involvement most of the time, and with only small groups of interested activists and other issue publics coming close to fulfilling the traditional conception of active citizenship. This is not a problem special to contemporary American politics. Certainly the mass audience of modern media has not become a mass of active political participation; rather, the mass audience is actually many issue publics, not a single engaged and informed polity. There is little evidence yet to suggest that Net will alter this equation.

While a proponent of the populistic potential of the Net might still argue that certain special properties of communication and information make the Net different from other communication technologies and will exempt it from these human limits, the burden of that argument is a heavy one indeed. The point of Lippmann's argument is that the capacity of the media to recreate politics is limited by human nature, not the technical properties of the media themselves. Improvements in the media do not alter the human limits.

My critique thus far is vulnerable to an objection based on a subtlety in democratic theory about citizen needs for information, and this objection is worth considering at this point. While that objection does not end up sustaining the populist theory, it does point us in the direction of a more realistic understanding of the benefits from the expansion in access to information. That objection rests on the theory of potential information.[33] In this view, the Net might increase popular accountability of government without measurably enhancing the level of information or knowledge of individual voters.[34] James

33. Douglas Arnold, The Logic of Congressional Action (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1990); Mathew McCubbins and Thomas Schwartz. "Congressional Oversight Overlooked: Policy Patrols versus Fire Alarms," American Journal of Political Science 28 (1984): 165-79.
34. James H. Snider, "New Media: Potential Information & Democratic Accountability: A

Snider uses this theory to argue that citizens need only be *potentially* informed in order to hold government accountable. That is, so long as public officials perceive that citizens have access to sufficient information *to become informed in the future*, they are likely to act accountably in the present.

The formulation of Snider's argument relevant for the present discussion is that the Net will enhance citizen control of government by making more information potentially available, even if citizens do not systematically assimilate that information in advance of government decisions. Citizens who are relatively indifferent to political information might nonetheless become more powerful if changes in the information environment make it easier for candidates, political activists, the media, and others to occasionally call public attention to the actions of government officials. So long as the *potential* exists for *post facto* learning to occur, *ex ante* learning is not necessary for political control—provided that intermediaries are available to direct and shape the flow of information and to help set the public agenda.

This is a persuasive argument, now employed in the literature in several different contexts. But, as Snider points out, its logic does not lead to the conclusion that representative democracy will be supplanted by direct citizen participation or that a newly engaged electorate will emerge from the telecommunications revolution. The key to this arrangement, which is the heart of what Arnold calls the "logic of congressional action" and McCubbins and Schwartz call "fire alarm" accountability, is the presence of intermediaries—activists, political professionals, the media, electoral challengers, and others—who pose the threat of awakening the public's attention to an action. It is these political professionals who organize political information and call to it the attention of the public, as Lippmann argued they must. Public control of government, in this model, requires an active stratum of knowledge brokers and mobilizers if the power of the public is to gain traction.

Snider's accountability thesis is perhaps the strongest claim for how the Net can alter politics without bringing about large-scale qualitative change: greater information may increase the responsiveness of government to the public, but without a dramatic change in citizen engagement and participation or a withering of the influence of political intermediaries and elites.

III. Community

Other observers have offered a different vision of Net-induced political transformation. I call this set of claims community-based, or community-oriented, because they hold in various ways that the key political function of the Net

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Case Study of Governmental Access Community Media," Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco (August 29, 1996).

will be the creation and enhancement of "community." Enthusiasts for Internet-mediated community are producing the latest contributions to a wide-ranging and extensive literature in the fields of communication, media studies, and critical theory. As Mark Poster notes, most new communication technologies are heralded as leading to an improved social order; excitement about the Net's capacity to build community, foster the "public sphere," and the like are the latest in a long series of predictions about how communications technologies will alter social structure and politics.[35] One of the first influential statements of this idea was made in 1939, when George Gallup predicted in a lecture the possibilities presented by radio technology, the wide distribution of newspapers, and the new survey techniques he had popularized. He envisioned the arrival of a "town meeting on a national scale," where new technology would allow the national polity to act as if it were a community of neighbors discussing problems together.

The contemporary incarnations of Gallup's idea are articulated in several ways, but most begin with what has now become a cliché: *physical distance will no longer matter for the creation and sustaining of community*. Rheingold states the paradigmatic claim: "community" is created when people interact with one another on the Net sufficiently long that they develop lasting relationships, and the Net frees this process of community-building from the limitations of physical proximity.[36] That unfettering of community from the bounds of geography extends what are now local communities to the national or international scale.

Built on this basic expectation is a more elaborate menu of possibilities: an enhancement of mutual understanding, greater appreciation for differences and the views of others, diminution of racial and gender boundaries, the building of shared values. The main idea here also seems intuitive—people communicating with one another and building bonds across barriers of distance and even culture. Several reviews of literature and thought on this topic are now available.[37]

The claim about community-building differs from the populist claim, in that the populist theory rests on changes in citizen-to-government communication whereas the community-oriented expectation rests on enhanced citizen-to-citizen communication. One can think of the two theories as orthogo-

35. Mark Poster, *The Second Media Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).
36. Howard Rheingold, "A Slice of Life in my Virtual Community," in *Global Networks*, ed. L. M. Harasim (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993): 57-80.
37. David Porter, ed., *Internet Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Aspen Institute, *The Future of Community and Personal Identity in the Coming Electronic Culture* (A Report of the Third Annual Aspen Institute Roundtable on Information Technology, David Bollier, Rapporteur, Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute, 1995); Steven G. Jones, ed., *CyberSociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995).

nal: one involves the effects of enhanced communication vertically between society and government, and the other the effects of enhanced communication horizontally within society. There is no logical impediment, then, to both transformations occurring at the same time—they are not opposing concepts. Indeed, some observers, like Rheingold, discuss changes consistent with both theories.[38]

Critiques of the community-based claim emerged rapidly. James Beniger and others argue that telecommunications technology is capable of nothing more than "pseudo-community."[39] Doheny-Farina and Foster argue that the absence of social solidarity in Net-based interaction, and the indulgence in solipsism that the Net fosters, limit the creation of community.[40] Foster even cautions that the increasingly common application of the term "community" to social relations on the Net may impoverish the common meaning of the word.

Definitions are at the heart of this emergent dispute about community on the Net. After all, "community" is one of the most over-used and ill-defined terms in contemporary public discourse, and its meaning becomes even more opaque in discussions of the Internet.[41] Some of the dispute about whether the Net will produce community is really an argument about what communities are, not an argument about what changes in social structure and politics the Net will bring. The Net obviously allows people to communicate over distance; the question is when to apply the label "community" to the resulting interactions.

I approach this definitional problem by turning briefly to conceptions of human association and moral order in communitarian political theory. To be sure, little of the popular hype about the Net and community rests on anything like a fully elaborated theory of this type. But the Net has attracted attention from communitarian theorists. Some of the academic communitarian activists like Etzioni and Fishkin are optimistic about its possibilities.[42] Yet other communitarians are skeptical of the technology-based claim. For instance, Michael Sandel argues that that while new communication technology such as the Internet does create interdependencies that span geography and political boundaries, this interdependence does not have the essence of community

38. Rheingold, "A Slice of Life in My Virtual Community."
39. James Beniger, "Personalization of Mass Media and the Growth of Pseudo-Community," *Communication Research* 14 (1987): 352-71.
40. Steven Doheny-Farina, *The Wired Neighborhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Derek Foster, "Community and Identify in the Electronic Village," in Porter, *Internet Culture*, 23-38.
41. Shawn Wilbur, "An Archeology of Cyberspaces: Virtuality, Community, Identity," in Porter, *Internet Culture*, 5-22.
42. Amitai Etzioni, "Communities: Virtual vs. Real," *Science* 277 (July 18 1997): 295; Fishkin, "Beyond Teledemocracy."

within it. He notes: "Converting networks of communication and interdependence into a public life worth affirming is a moral and political matter, not a technological one."[43] Following Jane Addams's progressive-era observations on modernization a century ago, Sandel argues that no amount of technological interaction can itself be sufficient to constitute community.[44]

All true communitarians share a critique of liberalism that posits the existence of a social good—a community good or goods—beyond the aggregation of each individual's interests and atomistic understanding of what is desirable. The state, in such a society, should pursue that good, rather than merely ensuring fair and equal pursuit of individual ends by citizens.[45] In the communitarian conception, the ethical basis of community cannot be understood or accounted for by the liberal conception of citizens as individuals motivated or driven by atomistic, particularistic incentives, passions, and interests.[46] The communitarian community is not simply an aggregation of ontologically and ethically whole individuals talking together, recreating together, conducting negotiations about the good, or engaging in other kinds of commerce.[47] It is more than merely groups that are social in the sense that they contain individuals interacting with one another. It contains an intersubjective meaning and understanding of the good, and this meaning and understanding is more than the sum of the individual parts.

It is not necessary to accept or reject fully the entire weight of the communitarian critique of liberal justice and ethics to accept the proposition that groups of citizens may differ in the nature of their ethical conceptions and commitment to a social good. Indeed it seems in practice that a range of variation in the social and ethical intensity of "communities" exists, and that individuals may at times rely on a jumbled palette of ethical standards—some rational, some norm-based, some rights-based, some based on a view of the social good. It seems clear that, in vivo, many individuals do not fall neatly into either liberal or communitarian communities, but exhibit elements of both. In practice, individuals may feel more or less responsibility for the welfare of their community beyond their own interests, they may feel more or less

43. Michael Sandel, *Democracy and its Discontents* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1996), 340.

44. Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1907).

45. Charles Taylor, "Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate," in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy L. Roseblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 159-82.

46. Gerald Doppelt, "Beyond Liberalism and Communitarianism: Towards a Critical Theory of Social Justice," in *Universalism vs. Communitarianism: Contemporary Debates in Ethics*, ed. David Rasmussen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 39-60; Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

47. Amitai Etzioni, "A Moderate Communitarian Proposal," *Political Theory* 24 (May 1996): 155-71.

willingness to sacrifice for their community beyond merely avoiding harm to others, and they may identify their own interests to a greater or lesser degree as a function of the good of the larger community.

Thus it is useful here to think of associations of individuals that conform more closely to the communitarian model as "thick" communities, and those that fall further away as "thin." A thick community, then, is a group in which a common good beyond the sum of individuals' private interests is pursued, and in which individuals define their own interests and values in reference to collective goods. A thin community, on the other hand, is a group of individuals whose private interests, values, or habits are common or complementary, whether in discussion, protest, market transactions, or the voting both. In thin community, individuals' pursuit of personal interests works to the advantage of all, so individuals benefit from membership in the group. But their interests are coherent and viable individually, prior to membership in the community. It is this difference in relationship of the private to the public, the individual to the collective, that distinguishes these forms of community. In thick community, the personal is dependent upon the public, while in thin community the public interest is dependent upon the convergence of personal interests.

Traditionally, both thick and thin communities have typically required proximity, in neighborhoods or towns, or even within institutions. Yet the Internet has been widely heralded for detaching community from the limitations of proximity. This brings us back to the crux of the question of on-line community. If one accepts that a range of community types exists in practice, with forms such as thick and thin at either pole, then the question is not simply whether "virtual community" is possible, but rather what kind of community the Internet can sustain. Can it build thick community, thin community, or neither?

The most prominent of communitarian activists, Etzioni, believes that answer just might be thick community. He does concede that a "virtual" community existing over the Internet is not a perfect substitute for the real thing. He notes that real communities are better than virtual ones at communicating affect, holding participants accountable, and creating strong and intimate bonds.[48] Yet, Etzioni argues, the Net can contribute to the building and sustaining of community in other ways. The Net allows the development of community in spite of physical distance, and this facility exceeds what is possible by telephone in at least one way, namely allowing social bonding to occur asynchronously. Moreover, community-building through the Net is not bounded by political borders, identities, or appearance. Net-based community also offers a better "memory effect," because of the presence of written records.[49]

The problem in evaluating Etzioni's claim is that there is not much direct

48. Etzioni, "Communities: Virtual vs. Real."
49. Etzioni, "Communities: Virtual vs. Real."

empirical evidence available. Unlike the study of political participation, where the dependent variable can be specified and measured with some success, measuring "community" is difficult at best, even using such blunt categories as "thick" and "thin." Researchers have begun to study the formation of community on the Net at the micro-level, nonetheless, by examining the nature of interactions among participants in on-line discussion groups. For instance, Baym argues that on-line communities can be generated through "group specific forms of expression, identities, relationships, and normative conventions," and her conception hints at thick community.[50] Hill and Hughes report a similar finding about on-line communication.[51] Anderson et al. report on sociological research showing that electronic networks lead to the "breakdown of status-based social structures" and are "related to increased participation in discussion, decision-making, and task processes by those who typically are politically or economically disadvantaged."[52]

Anecdotal evidence describing specific instances of "community" also supports the assertion that is it possible for meaningful social interaction that approaches the idea of thick community to develop on the Net. Hafner's and Rheingold's popular accounts of the WELL, for instance, describe the legendary on-line group as exhibiting significant bonds and normative expectations that would appear to meet that standard.[53]

Yet for every example of a thick community on-line, one can find counterexamples of groups that failed to coalesce beyond a very minimal kind of interaction that likely does not even meet the standard of thin community. The French Minitel system is perhaps the most prominent of the large counterexamples to the exclusive WELL. The Minitel system was the first large-scale, public electronic mail and bulletin-board system in the world. The system was long in development, but was functioning as an essentially nationwide communication system by the late 1980s, with millions of terminals in place around France. At the beginning, Minitel was heralded as a serious public information tool that would do no less than modernize French society—if not building what I am calling thick community, at least contributing

50. Nancy K. Baym, "The Emergence of Community in Computer-Mediated Communication," in *Cybersociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, ed. Steven G. Jones (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995), 139.

51. Kevin A. Hill and John E. Hughes, "Computer Mediated Political Communication: The USENET and Political Communities," *Political Communication* 14 (1997): 3-27.

52. Robert H. Anderson, Tora K. Bikson, Sally Ann Law, and Bridge M. Mitchell, *Universal Access to E-Mail: Feasibility and Societal Implication*, MR-650-MF (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1995).

53. Katie Hafner, "The Epic Saga of The Well," *Wired* (May 1997):100-36; Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1993).

to the state of French community in the thin sense. But Minitel brought a variety of unintended consequences, mainly a huge demand for recreational uses—the creation of games, social bulletin boards, sex-oriented message systems, and the like. Commerce does take place on Minitel in significant volume, but the interaction there differs dramatically from that of the WELL: it is game-like and typically non-substantive in a normative sense.[54] If Minitel constitutes community, it is thin community at best.

Laura Gurak describes two cases of Internet-based groups that illustrate thin communities in the U.S.[55] These groups, which she calls "rhetorical" communities, formed on-line for the purpose of protesting actions that they perceived threatened privacy. One protested against the actions of a corporation, Lotus, and the other protested against an Internet policy of the Clinton administration. Both groups' members had individual private interests in privacy protection, shared a facility with on-line communication and the symbols of the Internet, and organized to conduct protests. These protest groups might be thought of as thin communities in the best sense: they acted collectively on matters of mutual concern, and in the Lotus case were successful at achieving a political goal together. Thin community hardly need be game-like or superficial.

The problem, then, is discerning which is the archetype for social interaction and "community" on the Net: the comparatively thick interaction of the WELL, or the thinner talk of Minitel and Gurak's on-line protests. I take the central claim of on-line community proponents to be that enough interaction on the Net will be similar to the thick community of the WELL to produce a meaningful change in the aggregate social fabric.

My response to that claim—and also to the less grand claim that the Net can produce thin community—is that it is remarkably premature to conclude that enough real community will develop on-line to have much effect on social practice or politics. In all likelihood, a wide range of communities will evolve on the Net, and researchers with the advantages of historical evidence at hand will one day be able to identify more precisely the circumstances that tend to produce one over another. But I believe it is simply too soon to jump to the conclusion that increased communication capacity will itself be sufficient to shift the balance of community in practice.

At least four reasons exist to doubt that thick on-line communities will be the rule rather than the exception. First, the shared values and norms that elevate social interaction above thin talk are best nourished by *familiarity* among individuals. Trust, social capital, and the shared norms of thick community do

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54. André Lemos, "The Labyrinth of Minitel" in *Cultures of Internet: Virtual Spaces, Real Histories, Living Bodies*, ed. Rob Shields (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications: 1996), 11-31.
55. Laura Gurak, *Persuasion and Privacy in Cyberspace* (New Haven: Yale, 1997).

not grow well in the soil of anonymity. While the Net does have the capacity to build familiarity and repeated interaction, what makes the Net so remarkable a tool is precisely that it allows far-flung, complex communication outside traditional boundaries of familiarity. That is, it allows people to communicate *outside* of their community boundaries. Much of the social interaction on the Web, in chat rooms, and in bulletin board systems, does not appear to be characterized by serious familiarity with others. Turkle's work on the social psychology of the Net has documented its capacity to elicit false identities and altered personas.[56] Indeed, there is no logical or empirical reason to believe that the Net encourages meaningful familiarity to any greater degree than it encourages superficial, anonymous, or misleading interaction.

Second, thick community is nourished by *stable relationships* and the expectation of future reliance on others. Yet the Net encourages shifting and fluid relationships as least as much as it encourages the opposite. Citizens may join and quit on-line social groups with ease. On-line "community" is vulnerable to more possibilities of rapid and frequent reshuffling than relationships grounded in geographic proximity, work associations, or other institutionalized interests.

Third, thick community is nourished by *social pressure*, the often intangible normative force of face-to-face contact. The existence of such pressure has been demonstrated by social psychologists, who have shown that participation in face-to-face groups exerts a normative influence on individuals, causing predictable shifts in their views and opinions with respect to the group norm. This normative pressure can be quite independent of the transmission of factual information, knowledge, or persuasive arguments, and seems to stem from a combination of approval-seeking and condemnation-avoiding behaviors—it is not rational deliberation.[57] While there is no reason to believe that such pressure, or something like it, is impossible on-line, there is good reason to think that technological mediation between people does diminish the effect. As Jane Mansbridge argues, social contact of a face-to-face nature fosters empathy, conflict avoidance, and the assumption of responsibility by speakers.[58] On-line communication serves to insulate speakers from the consequences of their words and actions. Absent the normative force of face-to-face contact, it is not at all clear that the same degree of empathy, avoidance of conflict, and other mechanisms of social pressure exist. The commonly

56. Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

57. Martin F. Kaplan, "The Influencing Process in Group Decision Making," in *Group Processes*, ed. Clyde Hendrick (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1987); David G. Myers and Lehmut Lamm, "The Group Polarization Phenomenon," *Psychological Bulletin* 83 (1976): 602-27.

58. Jane J. Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

reported phenomenon of "flaming" illustrates the effects of removing from communication the constructive inhibitions that attend face-to-face contact.

These three characteristics of social interaction—familiarity, stability, and social pressure—are not entirely absent on the Net, but are hardly abundant among groups with no ties to one another outside the Net. They are most likely to be found among existing communities who choose to communicate on the Net—among colleagues collaborating via electronic mail, or among friends communicating at a distance. They appear to occur spontaneously much less frequently on the Net. One can not help but question the possibility that the Net will contribute to community on a large scale given the infrequency with which one encounters these characteristics. Just as a handful of successful utopian communities of a few hundred souls in the hills of Pennsylvania or Indiana, for example, would not appreciably alter the social fabric of their states or the nation, a few richly connected, thick communities on-line would not recreate social relations for the nation.

A final reason to doubt that the Net is likely to have a transformative effect on community stems from earlier experience. The Net is hardly producing the first dramatic expansion in communication: telephone, radio, and television also expanded communication capacity profoundly. Just as those technologies failed to contribute toward a more participatory, populistic brand of politics in the U.S., so too have they apparently failed to contribute to the building of anything like thick community on a large scale.[59] In fact, some researchers have concluded that other media may have contributed to a *decay* in trust, social capital, and the state of community, rather than the other way around.[60] Regardless of whether one is prepared to lay responsibility for the present state of community at television's doorstep, there seems no compelling reason to believe that the communication capacity of the Net will have such a dramatically different effect than have other advances in point-to-point and broadcast communication.

This question of whether the WELL or Minitel is the more accurate harbinger of things to come on the Net rests in large part on the difference between increasing the quantity of communication in society, and altering its political or ethical quality. Quite clearly the problem of community is one of the substance of communication, not its mere volume. As Page argues, over-

59. Abramson, Arterton, and Orren, *The Electronic Commonwealth.*

60. Robert D. Putnam, "Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America—The 1995 Ithiel De Sola Pool Lecture," *PS: Political Science and Politics* (December 1996): 664-83; M. Margaret Conway, *Political Participation in the United States,* 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 1991); Anthony N. Dobb and Glenn F. MacDonald, "Television Viewing and Fear of Victimization: Is the Relationship Causal?," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37 (1979): 170-79.

coming spatial distance with new communication means is far from sufficient for establishing significant forms of political communication and deliberation.[61] The problem is much more complex, and it involves the impossibility of large numbers of citizens communicating in a meaningful way with one another about complex matters. This returns us to the old observations of Lippmann: communication among citizens must be mediated, because no amount of increased bandwidth in and out of homes will increase people's willingness and capacity to engage in the quality of communication required for meaningful community and politics.[62]

The tendency for observers of the Net to emphasize the WELLs of the world, and to downplay its Minitels, may reflect what Morone calls the "democratic wish."[63] That wish is the unflagging American hope for direct involvement of the public in pursuit of a shared interest. This hope springs and re-springs from the idealized American image of democracy, in the face of

61. Page, *Who Deliberates?*, 4.

62. Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 362. See also discussions of the Internet and the public sphere, which are often found in association with matters of community. The claim that is sometimes made here stems from the fact that the democratic and deliberative public sphere depends upon "spontaneous and voluntary association" [John Louis Lucaites, "Studies in the Public Sphere," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 8 (1997): 352] where the better argument may prevail on the basis of appeals to reason among free and equal deliberaters. Two of the great impediments to achievement of a contemporary public sphere, according to Habermas, are the interests of the state in shaping public dialog to protect its own power, and the corruptive influence of the mass media, which fragments society into private-oriented individuals who do not, or can not, engage in reasoned debate about public issues [Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989)]. Many have noted that the Internet appears promising in light of all these considerations: it offers new forms of "spontaneous and voluntary" association, especially through bulletin boards, mailing lists, newsgroups, chat rooms, and the like, and it is comparatively free of centralized control and institutional self-interest on the part of the state and media organizations. For the purposes of the argument in this article, note that Habermas's conception of the public sphere falls close to the requirements of thick community, where mutual agreement and a democratic validity that comes from something approaching unanimity emerge from deliberation; the public forum is necessary for producing a unity of interest. On the other hand, McCarthy's effort to rescue Habermas's stringent formulation replaces mutual agreement and unanimity with the objective of peaceful consent and accommodation among participants; McCarthy's interpretation of the public sphere can reside in thin community, in a group of deliberaters who bring private interests along with reason and a willingness to accommodate where unanimity is impossible. His conception admits the individualistic interests of members of thin community, and it demonstrates that a public sphere need not draw on the common good of thick community to get off the ground [Thomas McCarthy, "Practical Discourse: On the Relation of Morality to Politics," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig C. Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 51-72].

63. James A. Morone, *The Democratic Wish: Popular Participation and the Limits of American Government* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

persistent evidence to the contrary. In its Internet-based, communitarian ver-
sion, a key political function of the Net is to make discernable what are now
only latent common interests and values, by elevating our dialog with one
another. But of course the hope rests on the tenuous assumption that a
common interest exists and can be developed, that a national or sub-national
community can be united if its common interests are uncovered through
enough communication.

Another, more mundane reason for overestimating the community-build-
ing effect of the Net is that computer and political professionals have been
over-represented among early adopters of the technology for political uses.
Journalists, activists, lobbyists, campaign staff, government officials and
researchers, are at present disproportionately well represented among people
using the Net for political reasons. It is interesting to note that while nearly
100% of members of Congress use electronic mail, well under half their con-
stituents do so. Computer professionals interested in policy problems con-
cerning the Net itself are especially well represented on-line. It is symbolic of
the underlying nature of on-line participation that Gurak's account of two of
the earliest efforts at community organizing on line tells the story of computer
professionals heavily involved in policy battles over computer privacy.[64]
There is little doubt that such professionals have benefited from the capacity
of the Net for political organizing and communication.

Yet these citizens bring with them to the Net professional norms and stan-
dards, some of the structure of their employment networks and associations,
and professional incentives to use the Net. For them, the Net has indeed
already proven an enormously useful tool for serious communication, under-
taken in a context of comparably high trust, familiarity, and so on. One can
find many instances where the Net has extended and reinforced *existing pro-
fessional communities* like this, or has served their political interest in some
other way. But that is a long way from the enormous task of building political
community more widely. The difference may be commonly underestimated
by intensive users of the Net.

IV. Accelerated Pluralism

My evaluation of the populist and community-oriented theories does not
strictly rule out any possibility of change along the lines they postulate, but it
does suggest that a few of the most plausible causal mechanisms by which
such change might occur do not find support in our current understanding of
politics. Other mechanisms by which a shift toward populism or communitar-
ianism could occur might well be suggested. Indeed one message of this dis-

64. Gurak, *Privacy and Persuasion in Cyberspace.*

cussion is a call for those who speculate about the Net to ground their claims in an explicit model of behavior consistent with what we know about media, political participation, social structures, and especially, the political individual. My evaluation suggests that while instances of populistic politics or rich, thick community may emerge, there is little reason to expect that these will grow in such number as to transform politics.

I propose a different account of political change regarding the central effect of the Net on politics. I do not forecast an end to the highly pluralistic and fragmented nature of the polity, a decrease in intense political competition among groups, or the emergence of a common good that binds the public together, as either a consensual majority or a nation of intensified communities. Instead, I anticipate an acceleration of changes in pluralism that have been underway for some time. Specifically, I expect a shift toward a system of more rapidly changing issue groups, with less stability and less dependence on private and public institutional structures.

I ground my theory of accelerated pluralism in two assumptions. First, increased communication and information flow brought by the Internet will *not* change the basic logic of pluralism. At the individual level, the Net will not alter the fact that most people are highly selective in their attention to political issues and their assimilation of information; they tend to care relatively intensely about a few issues while remaining disinterested and uninformed about most. There is no reason to expect an end to the fact that, as Walker puts it, "most people, most of the time, are able to find better things to do than participate in politics."[65] And "even if some method could be devised for all citizens to be consulted on every governmental decision, few people would have the time or inclination to participate." Increased communication capacity does not alter the underlying degree of political sophistication of the American electorate or its motivations to become involved in politics or community. This I take as both the central reason why the populist thesis is improbable and the starting point for any accurate observations about the Net.

At the level of social structure, the rich web of social connections that has structured Americans' public affairs since at least the time of Tocqueville's observations will not be wiped out by the Net. No less now than when David Truman wrote about American pluralism, Americans will associate themselves in groups, and structure their political participation and engagement through those associations.[66] There is no compelling reason to believe that this

65. Jack L. Walker, Jr., *Mobilizing Interest Groups in America: Patrons, Professions, and Social Movements* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1991), 19.

66. David B. Truman, *The Governmental Process: Political Interests and Public Opinion* (New York: Knopf, 1951).

old and simple facet of American political behavior will come to an end by
the expansion of communication through the Net. This first assumption can be
summarized by saying that neither the psychology nor sociology of political
participation are altered by increasing the capacity of citizens to communicate.

My second assumption concerns mobilization. I assume that communica-
tion and information flow *will* lower the obstacles to grass-roots mobilization
and organization faced by political entrepreneurs, activists, and others, and
will speed the flow of politics. Lower costs of organizing collective action
offered by the Net will be particularly beneficial for one type of group: those
outside the boundaries of traditional private and public institutions, those not
rooted in businesses, professional or occupational memberships or the con-
stituencies of existing government agencies and programs.

As Mark Bonchek has observed, the Net decreases the transaction costs
involved in identifying potential contributors to a lobbying or campaign
effort, mobilizing them, and coordinating their efforts.[67] While all interest
groups face Mancur Olsen's problem, those traditionally best able to over-
come free-riding have been those with institutional patrons and access to sub-
stantial funding. For citizen-based groups, mechanisms for maintaining loyal
memberships and ways to keep the support of financial patrons have been key
ingredients in success.[68] For outsider groups without these resources, I
believe, the decreased transaction costs possible with the Net will enable more
vigorous and frequent political efforts.

These two assumptions lead one to deduce that the Net will contribute to
an intensification of group-centered, pluralistic politics. In particular, these
considerations suggest that more rapid and more intense citizen responses to
mobilization efforts by linkage groups are likely to occur. The most intriguing
aspect of this change is the possibility of decreasing coherence and stability
in interest group politics, as the group process loses some of its dependence
on stable public and private institutions.

This process might be described in terms of the democratization of group
elites, as mobilizing and organizing become more accessible to new political
organizers and activists who do not necessarily have financial or institutional
connections. Pluralism may increasingly take on a fragmented and unstable
character, through the rapid organization of issue publics for the duration of a
lobbying effort, followed by their dissolution.

None of this is qualitatively new. Converse identified the existence of issue

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67. Mark Bonchek, "Grassroots in Cyberspace: Using Computer Networks to Facilitate
Political Participation," MIT Artificial Intelligence Laboratory Working Paper 95-2.2, Presented
at the 53rd Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, April 6, 1995.
url: www.ai.mit.edu/ projects/ ppp/ home.htm.

68. Walker, *Mobilizing Interest Groups.*

publics years ago, and recent research has confirmed their significance in American public opinion, and their importance in public policy.[69] The composition of the interest group universe has also been changing for two and a half decades, as traditional business, labor, and professions-based groups have been joined by a wealth of new, citizen-based groups.[70] These new groups are not rooted in traditional occupation or professional membership structures, but are oriented around ideology, social movements, or single issues. While the large majority of political organizations are still of the traditional type, the ratio is changing.[71] The result has been a broader range of interests and a greater number of issues being represented in the interest-group system. These developments have already made the political system more fluid and accessible, eroding the stability of the old subgovernment-style pluralism.[72]

Grossman has described a good example of what Firestone calls bringing "new intermediaries" to politics.[73] In 1994 a successful effort was mounted against a bill in Congress that would have presented large barriers to home schooling. Advocates of home schooling used the Internet to identify people interested in home schooling and successfully used electronic mail to urge them to contact Congress in opposition to the bill. Members of the ad hoc issue group flooded Capitol Hill with letters and phone calls, and managed to defeat the key school bill amendment.[74]

What is significant about this effort is that the participants were widely dispersed around the country, belonged to no common membership organization or group, and had no previous experience in organized lobbying on this issue.

69. Philip E. Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," in *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. David E. Apter (New York: Free Press, 1964); Jon Krosnick and Shibley Telhami. "Public Attitudes Toward Israel: A Study of the Attentive and Issue Publics," *International Studies Quarterly* 39 (1995): 535-54; Krosnick, "Government Policy and Citizen Passion: A Study of Issue Publics in Contemporary America," *Political Behavior* 12 (March 1990): 59-92.

70. Jeffrey M. Berry, "Citizen Groups and the Changing Nature of Interest Group Politics in America," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 528 (July 1993): 30-41; Allan J. Cigler and Burdett A. Loomis, eds., *Interest Group Politics*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1986); Walker, *Mobilizing Interest Groups in America*.

71. David C. King and Jack L. Walker, Jr., "An Ecology of Interest Groups in America," in Jack L. Walker, Jr., *Mobilizing Interest Groups in America: Patrons, Professions, and Social Movements* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 47-73; Berry, "Citizen Groups and the Changing Nature of Interest Group Politics in America."

72. Berry, "Citizen Groups and the Changing Nature of Interest Group Politics in America," 30-41; Robert M. Stein and Kenneth N. Bickers, *Perpetuating the Pork Barrel: Policy Subsystems and American Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1995), 5.

73. Charles M. Firestone, "The New Intermediaries," in Aspen Institute, *The Future of Community and Personal Identity in the Coming Electronic Culture* (A Report of the Third Annual Aspen Institute Roundtable on Information Technology, David Bollier, Rapporteur, Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute, 1995), 39-43.

74. Grossman, *The Electronic Republic*, 145-46.

The group was not the product of institutional interests or patrons organizing a grass-roots campaign. The home schooling issue did not attract widespread public concern, but was rather a matter of intense interest to a tiny minority without access to significant financial resources. The Net facilitated efforts by activists to identify these citizens and solicit their participation in the lobbying effort. Without the Net as a means for identifying and communicating with the issue group, it is likely that the high costs of mounting the effort in a traditional way would have doomed the nascent group.

A similar example described by Wittig and Schmitz involves the genesis on-line of a local effort to provide facilities for homeless persons in Santa Monica, California.[75] A group of community activists undertook a four-year effort to persuade the city government there to create a homeless center and other services. Although the group met regularly face-to-face, in the manner of traditional grass-roots groups, Wittig and Schmitz argue that the availability of an electronic communications network in Santa Monica was an enormous boost to organization and lobbying efforts. More importantly, they argue, the electronic medium facilitated the creation of a lobbying group that crossed socioeconomic lines, drawing in both well-heeled Santa Monicans and the homeless themselves. That is, the computer network freed political organizing from one of the boundaries that typically limit the composition of political groups.

These home schooling and homeless services examples reveal a big part of the future of on-line politics: an acceleration of the process of identifying and mobilizing groups into political action, outside some of the traditional constraints on interest group formation and structure. The result may be a political system in which issues develop and move more quickly because of the quicker cycle of mobilization and response, and in which government officials increasingly hear from and respond to new kinds of groups—those without large, stable memberships or affiliations with established institutions.

V. Conclusion

My conclusion that there are many theoretical and empirical reasons to doubt a simple and direct connection between changes in information and communication technology and the political behavior of the public does not lead me to reject the idea that the Net will have significant effects on public life. There is good reason to believe that the Net will contribute to the decentralization of control over privately owned media, perhaps militating against the trend toward media concentration. In the most optimistic view, the Net could help

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75. Michele Andrisin Wittig and Joseph Schmitz, "Electronic Grassroots Organizing," *Journal of Social Issues* 52 (1996): 53-69.

move the U.S. closer to the Fourth Estate ideal of autonomous, independent, and truly representative media.[76] At the very least, the Net appears likely to decrease the influence of established media organizations over formation of the political agenda. Citizen interest in the progression of issues and events on the political stage will likely be influenced not only by newsroom decisions about what to cover and how, but also by the more chaotic and unpredictable flow of information around the Internet. An entire spectrum of issues will reach the agenda via the Internet, from conspiracy theories that might better have been filtered out, to matters of real but quiet substance that would have been crowded out of traditional coverage by more sensational stories.

It is also clear that the Internet will open more governmental and political information to contemporaneous public scrutiny. The area of campaign finance is one of the most promising examples. A nascent citizen movement for better disclosure has already succeeded in requiring candidates and donors to make records available on-line in California, and appears likely to succeed on a larger scale.[77] These two changes suggest, but hardly exhaust, the real possibilities for change offered by the Internet. Some will be the direct effect of bringing the new technologies to bear; others will occur as political institutions and practices themselves change in response to use of the Internet by citizens, groups, and officials themselves.

At the same time, there are two reasons to be cautious in drawing conclusions about how the Internet will affect politics. First, the Net has been a significant presence in American life for only a few years. Just as television did not exert its full influence on the practice of politics until the 1960s and 1970s, it is reasonable to expect that the full effects of the Internet will not be clear for years. Second, it is important to avoid the "McLuhanism" that mars much of the current commentary on the Net. The notion that "the medium is the message"[78] has the unfortunate effect of diverting attention away from the significance of content. Enthusiasts for technologically induced political change often overlook the extent to which what people communicate over the Net is similar to what is communicated face-to-face or through other media, even

76. The literature dealing with the failure of the media to satisfy the "Fourth Estate" concept is voluminous. For a variety of perspectives, see: Lucas A. Powe, Jr., *The Fourth Estate and the Constitution: Freedom of the Press in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Ben H. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, 4th ed. (Boston, Beacon Press, 1992); Jay G. Blumler and Michael Gurevitch, *The Crisis of Public Communication* (New York: Routledge, 1995); and Page, *Who Deliberates?*

77. Office of the Secretary of State, "Jones Lauds Governor's Approval of Electronic Filing," Press Release, Sacramento, California, Oct. 11, 1997; Kim Alexander, "Internet Disclosure of Campaign Finance Data Now: The Law in California," California Voter Foundation Press Release, Sacramento, California, Oct. 11, 1997.

78. McLuhan, *Media: The Extensions of Man*, 23ff.

though the messages can flow farther, faster, and with fewer intermediaries. Both populist and communitarian transformations of the American political system depend more on substance than on the volume and distribution of communication. With respect to central matters like who votes and how "thick" or "thin" communities form, there are good reasons to think that the new messages will resemble the old in many ways—that the medium is not the entire message.