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Author(s): James E. Katz

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Struggle in Cyberspace: Fact and Friction on the World Wide Web

By JAMES E. KATZ

ABSTRACT: The Internet and World Wide Web have transformed the way local cultures produce and maintain solidarity regarding what should be accepted as facts. These technologies provide a level playing field—it is no longer the case that those with the most massive resources will have the biggest audience. Indeed, many small sites command huge followings. The Internet and the Web allow for the quick dissemination of information, both false and true; unlike newspapers and other media outlets, there are often no quality control mechanisms on Web sites that would permit users to know what information is generally recognized fact and what is spurious. On the Internet and the Web, facts more easily escape from their creator's or owner's control and, once unleashed, can be bandied about. Groups that wish to control what is perceived as fact will find the Internet a threat. Those groups that hail competition between outlooks will welcome what the Web hath wrought.

Professor James E. Katz studies how the Internet and World Wide Web have been changing the way we live and communicate. Before coming to Rutgers, he was director of social science research at Bellcore. Earlier in his career, he was on the faculties of the University of Texas and Clarkson University and won fellowships to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard. Katz is the author of several books, and his writings have been translated into five languages.

POLLSTERS working for the National Geographic Society and National Science Foundation find that many of the so-called facts we Americans believe are true—be they about whether the planet Earth revolves around the sun, which two nations signed the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) Treaty, or where in the world the United States is—are actually incorrect. Even the best and brightest among us are ignorant of vast stretches of history, science, culture, and the arts. Indeed, many of the facts that we individually know and recite are simply assertions that have been passed along to us from accepted authorities (such as parents and friends and, occasionally, experts). Only most infrequently will we be skeptical enough to verify what is presented to us as fact.

People—with the exception of postmodernists—do not like being reminded of this limiting condition of reality. Solipsism, as witnessed through Plato's eyes, has been galling thinkers for over two millennia. We would prefer to go on with our quotidian existence than wrestle with unknowns. (Moreover, many cognitive psychologists from Herbert S. Simon onward argue that this is just as well for everyone's sake.)

FACTS ARE CULTURALLY PRODUCED AND ENFORCED

The cultural production and control of knowledge—or facts, as we call them here—deserve a closer look, especially from the perspective of how these processes are being affected by expanding capabilities of networked computers. The rapid and cheap

movement of information allowed by the Internet and related technologies poses some intriguing challenges for the more traditional forms of what we might term the sociology of knowledge.

Until the spread of radio and television programming a few decades ago, the production and interpretation of facts had been largely locally controlled. The significance of the entire process can be summed up by pointing to the importance governments have placed on the broadcasting of propaganda to the populations of their opponent powers, and the major efforts the opponent powers have invested in interfering with the broadcasts attest to that importance. Yet, even in the Old Testament, concern over foreign ideas and the importation of them as a way to erode or weaken an enemy were discussed prominently. More recent and perhaps more dramatic is the instance of the importation from Switzerland into Russia of Lenin by the Germans during World War I. Lenin, by the way, made the trip in a sealed railroad car. The dimension of hermetically segregating a dangerous ideology seems inescapable. From still more recent memory, I note that the Shah of Iran was undermined in substantial part by audiocassettes of Ayatollah Khomeini's speeches that were smuggled into that country.

But what can be easily won may not be so easily held. This can be as true of converts to a viewpoint as it is of territories held through garrisons. As Niccolò Machiavelli reminds, "The nature of the people is variable, and though it is easy to persuade them, it

is difficult to hold them to that persuasion. So it is necessary to take such measures that, when they believe no longer, *they can be made to believe by force*" (1940, 22, revised translation by author, emphasis added). Indeed, considerable force has been used over the centuries to persuade and maintain the belief structures of local societies. Nazi Germany, Pol Pot's Cambodia, and Stalinist Russia are but a few examples.

A BRIEF HISTORY AS TO THE MATTER OF FACT

Although space precludes an exhaustive recapitulation of the way force has been used to make facts, it is worth pointing out some of the traditional characteristics of facts and their substratum belief structures. Among the salient characteristics are the following:

1. Local control. Those who were dominant in the local area could exercise their power to limit the access and information flows from the outside.

2. Expensive information. Costs, particularly financial costs of access, were substantial. It was difficult even to acquire information about how to look for additional information. As is well known, as the cost of something rises, less of it will be used, and information and competing explanations are no exception to this rule.

3. Geographical limitation. Distance from the source drastically diminishes the availability of information. In the past, it was often nec-

essary to travel to the relevant location to peruse documents, and often the documents could be viewed only with special permission by special people under special circumstances.

4. Historical bias. Competing interpretations of past events were often unavailable, and the more distantly they occurred in the past, the less accessible they were.

5. Manipulation by opinion leaders and elites. History is written by those who live to write it. Plato, writing in *The Republic*, held that truth should be made to serve the state; it is advice that has been heeded even by those who have never read Plato.

6. Codes supplanted. Considerable effort has been devoted to supplanting previous codes and creating and maintaining new official versions. Much of the Balkan peninsula is now caught up in this process, with predictably horrifying consequences.

The growing availability of the Internet is altering all these conditions. The World Wide Web and associated technologies pose a direct threat to those who have used more traditional processes and technologies for controlling the movement and dissemination of information (as well as misinformation). Steps have been taken by Singapore and China (the latter nicknamed "The Building of the Great Firewall of China") to limit the material that can be viewed by denizens of their respective countries. In 1997, a Singaporean man was fined the equivalent of \$55,000 for improperly downloading offensive offshore materials. The United States has also attempted to pass legislation

limiting what materials can be seen over the Internet. (The U.S. Supreme Court overturned the Communications Decency Act in 1997.)

FACTS' FUTURE IS NOW

Among the consequences for the facts of our time, and for those of the future, are that equal time is given to any viewpoint; false information spreads quickly; true information spreads quickly; and facts more easily escape from their creator's or owner's control. Let us briefly survey each of these consequences in turn.

Equal time to any viewpoint

Organizational size does not necessarily translate into a large Internet presence. Indeed, the bookseller amazon.com grew from nothing to a major merchant with a handful of staff in a matter of months. More pertinent for our interests is the way in which political organizations can use the Internet to countervail their opponents. For instance, one can go to the Web site of Britain's ruling party and learn about all the good things they have done for their country and, for that matter, Ireland. With a mere click of a mouse, an interested individual can go to Sinn Fein's Web site and learn about the evils of that ruling party.

More disturbing are the hate groups that are increasingly populating the Web. They range from neo-Nazis to pederast groups, and everything in between. Any kind of lie can be told, and, with the Web authoring tools so readily available, an undocu-

mented lie can be made to look as real as the most carefully documented research finding.

Fast spread of false information

Urban legends, those more than believable stories passed by word of mouth, have found a new speed and impact via the Internet. These, in my personal experience, have included an alleged commencement address at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology by author Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. (nice speech, but not his) (Schmich 1997), which was also reported as a Harvard commencement address,¹ as well as false notices that the Internet would be shut down on 30 June ("to clean out old email messages"). Much more malicious is the continually resurfacing rumor that if one tries to help another motorist drive more safely, one is putting one's life in danger. The specifics of this rumor are that it is a gang initiation rite to drive at night with one's car lights out. When a courteous motorist flashes his or her lights at the aspiring gang member, to alert of the presumed mistake, the would-be gang member follows the motorist home and shoots him or her to death in the driveway. Supposedly this is part of a gang initiation ritual.

Such facts can be troubling to large numbers of people. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* of 27 February 1997 reported, for example, that scores of area workers were frightened when they read in their E-mail of a "well organized, well funded" ring that stole kidneys from unwary business travelers. The scenario, described to

Mobil Oil workers among others, was as follows:

The crime begins when a business traveler goes to a lounge for a drink at the end of the workday. A person in the bar walks up as they sit alone and offers to buy them a drink. The last thing the traveler remembers until they wake up in a hotel room bathtub, their body submerged to their neck in ice, is sipping the drink. There is a note taped to the wall instructing them to not move and to call 911. A phone is on a small table next to the bathtub for them to call. The business traveler calls 911, who have become quite familiar with this crime. The business traveler is instructed by the 911 to very slowly and carefully reach behind them and feel if there is a tube protruding from their lower back. The business traveler finds the tube and answers yes. The 911 operator tells them to remain still, having already sent paramedics to help. The operator knows that both of the business travelers' kidneys have been harvested. . . . This is not a scam or . . . a science fiction novel, it is real. It is documented and confirmable.

Of course, the contact numbers provided are not working numbers. The consequences of false facts such as these can be painful, including massive amounts of wasted effort and loss of peace of mind.

Fast spread of true information

The Internet can also make obscure facts widely known. A popular Web site is "The Smoking Gun" (<http://www.thesmokinggun.com>), which has posted Federal Bureau of Investigation memos about Lucille Ball and Frank Sinatra, the arrest report sheet of Clinton nemesis Linda Tripp, and George Burns's at-

tempt at smuggling goods into the United States. Matt Drudge, in his inside-Washington scoop column, has repeatedly embarrassed the Clinton administration.

Escape from creator's or owner's control

Governments, of course, will seek to control what is going on over the Internet. But at the same time, the Internet can erode the government's ability to control information, foreign policy, and its domestic population. The Internet was used to call into question the probity of the Federal Bureau of Investigation when Pierre Salinger, former presidential press secretary, revealed documents that he had found on the Internet that turned out to be fakes. The Central Intelligence Agency and other agencies have had their Web sites hacked (that is, broken into, or improperly accessed by outsiders attacking from remote computer terminals); in some cases the hackers would change the agency logo or write embarrassing graffiti over the agency emblem. Such damage can range even to stealing and publicizing state secrets. This was done in the wake of India's 1998 atom bomb tests. Beginning in May, hackers breached the Bhabha Atomic Research Center in Bombay, India's most sensitive nuclear weapons research facility. Their sophisticated attack not only profoundly embarrassed India's government but made public secret data from the tests as well (see, for example, <http://www.antonline.com/SpecialReports/milworm/story3.html>). This action also raised apprehen-

sion about the security and proliferation of nuclear information, especially those in developing countries.

CONCLUSION

While there is much ballyhoo about how the Internet will improve education and make all our lives better, it is quite apparent that the Internet poses new problems for how we traditionally create, consider, and act on facts. The public policy problems of governments, and for famous people in general, are likely to be enormous. These include loss of control, reintroduction of embarrassing chapters of history, and the investment of more effort in image making and preservation. It can also allow more numerous and cacophonous voices, which in turn could make it harder to reach agreement between fractious groups.

At the same time, more ideas can be circulated, and more viewpoints can be expressed. According to

Seymour M. Lipset and colleagues (1956), multiple stakes in multiple venues helps the spread and preservation of democracy. If what is true for a typographer's union is also true for countries (and, indeed, this seems to be the case), then ultimately cyberspace bodes well for the future, both of people and of facts.

Note

1. The spurious speech also was reported as a "Quote of the Day" on Wired news service.

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