

The Internet and the Daily Me

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“What’s black and white and read all over.” The punch-line to this kids’ joke may be lost on the next generation. Someday, your grandkids may look at you with a puzzled gaze, and ask, “What’s a newspaper grandpa?” Newspapers are a threatened species. In the Darwinian world of the media, print journalism is being outcompeted by the Internet. The latest casualty is the *Christian Science Monitor*, which recently announced “the end of its daily print format.” This respected newspaper is moving to the virtual world; it will no longer “publish daily physical newspapers.” Closer to home, the Missoulian reported this week that its parent company, Lee Enterprises, which owns several Montana newspapers, is in financial trouble. The company is suffering “severe reduction in revenues” as readers migrate to the Internet.

For people who would rather flip through a paper with their morning coffee than flip open their laptop, this is bad news. However, Brennan Slattery, who writes for PC World, welcomes these changes. Slattery comments on the *Christian Science Monitor*, that, “this move may be seen to some as the Internet “killing” a venerable, century-old publication. To me, it’s the evolution of modern journalism; a logical and progressive step in the direction many more will approach in the years to come.”

Not so fast; technological transitions are often unpredictable and morally ambiguous. For example, genetic technology holds fantastic possibilities for curing diseases, but it also raises the dark specter of cloning and designer babies. The Internet has created an astonishing information revolution, but also a revolution in pornography. Moral predications about new technologies should usually be painted in shades of grey; they are most often good and bad.

The Internet obviously has competitive advantages over the local, daily newspaper. Online news can be updated much faster and the Internet provides an overwhelming number of choices of news sources. So what is the dark side of people migrating to the Internet for their daily news? Cass Sunstein has identified one set of moral hazards in his book, *Infotopia*. He calls it the *Daily Me*.

Sunstein warns that some people will only read personalized versions of the news with their morning cup of coffee. Long before the Internet people managed the ideas and opinions to which they were exposed, the Internet just provides a powerful and efficient means to do this. The reason being, that Internet provides tools to construct preference profiles. Companies like Netflix and Amazon use these tools to make personalized recommendations of movies, books and music with amazing accuracy. When you log on to these businesses you are greeted by a semi-personalized page that offers several recommendations based on your previous selections, and selections made by people who fit your profile. The problem is this filters out books, music and movies that don’t fit your preference history, things that might be new and challenging. This may or may not be a problem with entertainment, but it could be with the news. By carefully filtering the news, blogs, newsgroups, and the like, one will be exposed to highly limited sources of information. Sunstein comments, “The central problem involves *information cocoons*: communications universes in which we hear only what we choose and only what comforts and pleases us,” this will be a “warm friendly places where everyone shares our views.” However, the price of the comfort of being only exposed to like-minded positions is the possibility of strengthening and reinforcing major errors in one’s thinking.

Wise people know that they are not the holy reservoir of truth. Being open to positions that challenge and make us uncomfortable promotes the development of minds that are honest, modest and generous. Honest minds are willing to admit that their positions might be faulty, narrow or in need of revision. Modest minds are able to admit error and seek correction. And generous minds listen to views they don't agree with. Wisdom cannot be acquired by only hearing echoes of what we already know and believe. Everyone needs to open a few windows at let new ideas in every now and then.

The local paper must serve the whole community, and because of this it contains a diversity of views and opinions. It cannot be personalized. The demise of newspapers might be inevitable, but this is not necessarily logical or progressive. Like most technological changes it is ambiguous. This change comes with the moral danger of only reading the *Daily Me*. This could encourage narrow-mindedness and the polarization of people into ideological strongholds. However, with new technologies we do not have to accept the bad with the good. Sunstein has warned us of the possibility of creating information cocoons. The Internet also provides the opportunity to be exposed to a great diversity of ideas and opinions, if we choose to let them in.

Dane Scott
The Center for Ethics

Cass Sunstein, *Infotopia* (Oxford: 2006)

Robert Talisse, *Democracy After Liberalism: Pragmatism and Deliberative Politics* (London: Routledge, 2005).

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