

# Intellectual Ammunition

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## Keeping the Internet Free Can Help, Not Harm, Community

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Elected officials at all levels of government are being called upon to tax, regulate, or subsidize access to the Internet. Often these calls are couched in terms of protecting our sense of community from perceived threats. But how real are these threats, and would placing new restrictions on the digital economy really help preserve community?

### **Perceived Threats**

Much is made of the fact that the Internet offers easier access to pornography. True enough--but it should be remembered that in doing so, the Internet could put the local porn shop out of business. By allowing out-of-state corporations to sell their products tax-free directly to consumers, it threatens to make local, desirable businesses obsolete. These are real concerns that deserve public debate and in some cases policy reforms.

When commentators say the Internet threatens community, they often define community as a group of people bound together by geographic proximity; specifically, neighborhoods. But that kind of community has co-existed with another kind of community--a group of people in various geographic locations, brought together by a shared interest--for centuries. Both kinds of community have lived with the printing press, the radio, the telephone, and the television, and both will survive the Internet.

True enough, on-line communications are limited to typed words and symbols, so they lack the subtle nuances that come from face-to-face contact, such as facial expression and tone of voice. Even the most sophisticated video-conferencing technology is unlikely to replace the empathy expressed by a pat on the shoulder, and no number of email messages--or their predecessors, the phone call or the hand-written letter--are going to substitute for the companionship that is built by, say, helping someone move to a new house.

### **Advantages of the On-line World**

Still, an on-line community does have its attractions and even advantages. It can meet at any time, and it requires no geographic space. It is a great place for exchanging ideas, either briefly and spontaneously (during chats) or deliberately (in carefully written letters). The Internet allows for smaller, more specialized groups to form. Each of the 100

people in the country--or world, even--interested in the writings of an obscure mystic of the middle ages, for example, can find, through an electronic mailing list, that they are not alone. How can this be bad?

Furthermore, the on-line community is not bereft of shared experiences. In my life on-line, I have seen (and been part of) mailing lists in which people exchange ideas on child-rearing, or celebrate news of a new job, or boast of the accomplishments of a recent fishing trip.

I've been a cybercitizen for over 10 years, long enough to offer some ideas on what has worked to build an on-line community--and long enough to conclude that the on-line life is a valuable addition to "real life."

*In a healthy community, there is a shared interest.* From the common topic, discussions can be narrowly focused, or diverge somewhat. The best communities are focused, but not rigidly so. For five years I participated in a discussion group about music. As expected, we spent a lot of time "talking" about music. But our discussions often turned to philosophy of art, which led to further tangential discussions about life experiences and meaning-of-life stuff. Eventually, many of us had face-to-face meetings, completing some of the elements of a traditional community that we lacked.

*In a healthy community, participants welcome newcomers.* Today, I am part of a collection of individuals who share information about mutual fund investing. Many of us have a lot of experience, but our focus is to help those new to the world of investing. The old-timers answer questions (which are usually variations on a few themes) from the "newbies," even as we chat about advanced topics.

*In a good community, a heretic keeps everyone sharp.* All groups of people are prone to "group think," during which conventional wisdom goes unquestioned and one way of thinking predominates. A heretic can provoke people to rethink settled questions. He may not change any opinions, but everyone will be better off for the challenge.

*In a healthy community, participants treat each other with respect.* It's difficult to develop this on-line, but experience, combined with patience, goes a long way.

### **What Elected Officials Should Do**

The Internet, in short, plays a very positive role in creating and sustaining communities where geographical proximity is not possible. Attempting to stamp out pornography or gambling on the Internet creates a real risk of cutting off from positive social interaction many people for whom the Internet plays a very important and positive role. Over time, if left free to evolve and grow, the benefits of these "virtual" communities may far surpass whatever risks they seem to pose today to vulnerable groups among us.

When confronted with demands to regulate the Internet, elected officials would do well to point out the positive community-building aspects of the Internet and ask how interventions would affect those features. It is a difficult trade-off that government officials are probably ill-suited to make. Better, I think, to relax, maintain the rule of law,

and let private virtue guide people as they go about the innate human practice of building communities.