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Loyal to 'The Daily Me'

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COMPUTING



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Will access to the wealth of information and communication resources on the internet and web enhance or undermine democratic processes? Are users exploiting these opportunities in ways that strengthen public accountability or inform public deliberation?

Cass Sunstein believes that in the face of almost unlimited choice, users will selectively filter the web - self-censoring themselves into "echo chambers" that undermine their exposure to the competing perspectives that are at the heart of deliberative democracy. As individuals decide what is newsworthy, press and mass media gatekeepers will decline in importance, along with the critical role they have played in supporting the public's exposure to more diverse viewpoints. In this scenario, he sees the emergence of a Republic.com that will miss the opportunities afforded by the web unless public initiatives can counter this self-induced fragmentation.

Republic.com 2.0 is a refreshing counter to overly optimistic perspectives on the internet and democracy, and Sunstein turns Utopian visions of the internet enabling individuals to gain access to exactly what they are interested in - "*The Daily Me*" - into a critical assessment of its potential for undermining democratic discourse.

Sunstein presents empirical studies of links among websites and discussion groups that support his claim that actors are prone to network with like-minded people and causes. He contrasts this with examples of the potential for mass media to bring diverse groups together around a common text. He then presents legal and constitutional arguments, anchored in the US context, that regulation can and should support the role of the media, including the internet, in fostering deliberative democracy. This leads into suggestions of public and regulatory initiatives that might counter the cocooning of individuals and groups, while protecting the essence of free expression. These range from self-regulation to applying public service broadcasting models to the internet.

While Sunstein introduces imaginative concepts, such as cocooning, to convey this argument, mass media pundits and researchers have been concerned over audience fragmentation since the advent of cable and satellite television and the empirical case is not yet convincing. For example, global information infrastructures, like the network of networks we call the internet, enable the world to be brought together around major media events in ways and at speeds never before possible, despite the increasing multiplicity of sources and channels.

Sunstein's concerns are anchored in a rather romantic view of the history of mass media, deliberative democracy and public forums. Actual experiences with online public forums would temper this view. The book's concern with internet users as an audience leads to less of a focus on the central importance of horizontal communication, such as supported by the telephone, texting, the internet and Web 2.0, by enabling social networking - the essence of pluralist democratic processes. Moreover, Sunstein is suspicious of individual choice in general, even for consumers - who choose to put

themselves on an online, hyperactive consumption treadmill.

Internet users are a diverse group. Only a small fraction use the internet for seeking information about politics or policy. The primary consumers of online political information are the media, opinion leaders and the politically active, who can use the internet to support the centrality of their roles as intermediaries. In such ways, the internet complements rather than replaces other media. Finally, on the TV or computer screen, people can selectively view and interpret even countervailing information to reinforce their existing beliefs and attitudes.

That said, this book should stimulate debate among all those with an interest in democracy and the internet, and make this a strong supplement to courses on the social implications of the internet.

- William H. Dutton is director, Oxford Internet Institute, Oxford University.

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