BUILDING AN INTERNET CULTURE

The Internet offers the hope of a more democratic society. By promoting a decentralized form of social mobilization, it is said, the Internet can help us to renovate our institutions and liberate ourselves from our authoritarian legacies. The Internet does indeed hold these possibilities, but they are hardly inevitable. In order for the Internet to become a tool for social progress, not a tool of oppression or another centralized broadcast medium or simply a waste of money, concerned citizens must understand the different ways in which the Internet can become embedded in larger social processes.

In thinking about culturally appropriate ways of using technologies like the Internet, the best starting-point is with people -- coherent communities of people and the ways they think together. Let us consider an example. A photocopier company asked an anthropologist named Julian Orr to study its repair technicians and recommend the best ways to use technology in supporting their work. Orr took a broad view of the technicians' lives, learning some of their skills and following them around. Each morning the technicians would come to work, pick up their company vehicles, and drive to customers' premises where photocopiers needed fixing; each evening they would return to the company, go to a bar together, and drink beer. Although the company had provided the technicians with formal training, Orr discovered that they actually acquired much of their expertise informally while drinking beer together. Having spent the day contending with difficult repair problems, they would entertain one another with "war stories", and these stories often helped them with future repairs. He suggested, therefore, that the technicians be given radio equipment so that they could remain in contact all day, telling stories and helping each other with their repair tasks.

As Orr's story suggests, people think together best when they have something important in common. Networking technologies can often be used to create a space for ‘communities of practice’, like the photocopier technicians, to think together in their own ways. This is perhaps the most common use of the Internet: discussion groups organized by people who wish to pool their information and ideas about a topic of shared interest. At the same time, we should not consider the Internet in isolation. Regardless of whether they are located in the same geographic region or distributed around the world, a community's members will typically think together using several media, such as the telephone, electronic mail, printed publications, and face-to-face meetings, and the Internet is best conceived as simply one component of this larger ecology of media.

Simply putting everyone on the Internet, however, will not ensure that they share their thinking with one another. A global accounting firm tried to pool its employees' knowledge using an expensive software package called Lotus Notes, but it was disappointed to discover that the employees did not share anything very important. A business professor named Wanda Orlikowski discovered the problem:

because the employees were competing for promotions, they had an incentive to keep their knowledge secret. As this case suggests, many applications of the Internet fail because the technology is poorly matched with the culture of the institution that adopts it.

Social networks also influence the adoption of new technologies: if the members of a community already have social connections to one another then they are more likely to benefit from technological connections. Every culture has its own distinctive practices for creating and maintaining social networks, and a society will be healthier in political and economic terms when these practices are functioning well. For example, it has long been a mystery why the people of Sarajevo have maintained their tolerant, pluralistic culture as terrible wars rage around them. A visit to the city, however, makes one reason entirely obvious: Sarajevo is organized around a pedestrian mall about two kilometers long, and the people entertain themselves by walking the length of this mall, meeting their acquaintances, and stopping for coffee. Social connections are thus continually renewed, and people are led naturally to introduce their friends to one another.

To take another example, Hungary remained a relatively healthy society during the Soviet occupation largely because of its well-developed social networks, based on a tradition of close life-long relationships among the members of each gymnasium class. The social networks of Silicon Valley, by contrast, depend on workplace connections. People frequently move to new jobs, but they assiduously maintain their relationships with their previous coworkers, even when those coworkers get new jobs themselves, so that they will have people to call the next time they are looking for work.

As these examples illustrate, the practices of social networking vary considerably, and each practice is knitted into the larger workings of the society. Authoritarian societies will attempt to suppress the cultural practices of networking, and democratic societies will promote them. Broad implementation of the Internet is one way to promote social networking, and the existing practices of networking can offer clues to the most effective ways of implementing the Internet. Of course, much of the spread of the Internet is spontaneous: so long as the telephone system works reasonably well, Internet service providers can spring up to offer Internet service to anyone who wants it. In an affluent society with strong social networks, this might be enough. But when resources are more limited or the cultural practices of networking have been weakened by a history of authoritarianism, state policies have some hope of promoting Internet use. The most obvious policy, simply plugging everybody in, is far too expensive and does not address the social and cultural issues. It is much better, not to mention cheaper, to take a modest, targeted approach. Building on experience in the United States and the analysis I have developed above, let me offer ten conclusions that might guide a country's development of a culturally appropriate Internet policy:

1. Resist the standard sales pitch for new technology. This sales pitch, which is found in every part of the world, plays on your fears of being left behind by technological change. It treats all of your experience and common sense as obsolete things of the past, and invites you to release your grip on the past by buying lots of technology. Unless you have a coherent plan that builds on your experience and common sense, however, buying a lot of machinery will not save you from being left behind.

2. Do not spend vast sums of money to buy machinery that you are going to set down on top of existing dysfunctional institutions. The Internet, for example, will not fix your schools. Perhaps the Internet can be part of a much larger and more complicated plan for fixing your schools, but simply installing an Internet connection will almost surely be a waste of money.

3. Focus on developing people, not machinery. Learning how to use the Internet is primarily a matter of institutional arrangements, not technical skills. Therefore, invite proposals for demonstration projects that enable your institutions to learn how to use the machinery. Once the institutions are ready to digest large amounts of machinery, the machinery will be cheaper.

4. Build Internet civil society. Find those people in every sector of society that want to use the Internet for positive social purposes, introduce them to one another, and connect them to their counterparts in other countries around the world. Numerous organizations in other countries can help with this.

5. Electronic mail is more important than technologies such as the World Wide Web that employ sophisticated graphics. You can get most of the social benefits of the Internet with low technology that works entirely with text, without foreclosing the possibility of upgrading the technology later on. Electronic mail does require literacy, but the benefits of electronic correspondence also provide a powerful motivation to acquire literacy skills.

6. Conduct extensive, structured analysis of the technical and cultural environment. Include the people whose work will actually be affected. A shared analytical process will help envision how the technology will fit into the whole way of life around it, and the technology will have a greater chance of actually being used.

7. Identify existing practices for sharing information and building social networks and experiment using the Internet and allied technologies to amplify them.

8. Don't distribute the technology randomly. Electronic mail is useless unless the people you want to communicate with are also online, and people will not read their e-mail unless they want to. Therefore, you should focus your effort on particular communities, starting with the communities that have a strong sense of

identity, a good record of sharing information, and a collective motivation to get online.

9. For children, practical experience in organizing complicated social events, for example theater productions, is more important than computer skills. The Internet can be a powerful tool for education if it is integrated into a coherent pedagogy. But someone who has experience with the social skills of organizing will immediately comprehend the purpose of the Internet, and will readily acquire the technical skills when the time comes.

10. Machinery does not reform society, repair institutions, build social networks, or produce a democratic culture. People must do those things, and the Internet is simply one tool among many. Find talented people and give them the tools they need. When they do great things, contribute to your society's Internet culture by publicizing their ideas

- **Philip Agre**

About the Lesson

This essay highlights the importance of the internet as a tool for social progress leading to establishing a more democratic society. The essayist offers some guidelines to evolve an appropriate Internet policy, such as advocating a reduction in investment on machinery, focusing on developing people, building up an Internet civil society, using existing social networks, etc., all to work towards a meaningfully networked society.

Philip Agre was an Associate Professor of Information Sciences at the Unversity of California at Los Angeles and for years he ran a popular technology e-mail list with thousands of subscribers.

GLOSSARY

authorization	:	(here)tyrannical or domineering
legacies	:	what is handed down from one generation to the next
embedded	:	fixed firmly
coherent	:	staying together
premises	:	the buildings and land that a company, a shop etc. uses
contending	:	striving
discussion groups	:	(here) a group of people who use the Internet to exchange ideas on a particular subject
ecology	:	(here) collection
pedestrian mall	:	a sheltered walk or promenade
assiduosly	:	closely and diligently
sales pitch	:	sales talk, promotional talk
obsolete	:	outmoded

foreclosing : stopping
structured : where the parts of something are connected with each other and form a whole

***Activity 1*: COMPREHENSION**

A. Tick the correct alternative:

1. Which one is wrong for internet policy-
   (a) building internet civil society
   (b) resisting standard sales pitch
   (c) distributing the technology randomly
   (d) not spending vast money to buy machinery

2. The Internet can be a powerful tool for
   (a) Education
   (b) Sports
   (c) Technical skill
   (d) All the above

B. Answer to the following questions should not exceed 10-15 words each:

1. What is the most common use of the Internet?
2. What do you understand by Electronic mail ?
3. Why does some applications of internet fail in some institutions?
4. What does Orr's story suggest?
5. How machinery can be helpful in the reform of a society?

C. Answer to the following questions should not exceed 30-40 words each:

1. In what ways, can the Internet help us to renovate our institutions and liberate ourselves from our authoritarian legacies?
2. Using technologies like the Internet, the best starting-point is with people.Explain.
3. Illustrate with example the practices of social networking.
4. How can we build Internet civil society ?
5. How does Social networks help in the adoption of a new technology?

D. Answer to the following questions should not exceed 60-80 words each:

1. Machinery does not reform society, repair institutions, build social networks, or produce a democratic culture. Explain.

2. Philp Agre offers ten conclusions that might guide a country's development of a culturally appropriate Internet policy. What are these conclusions?

E. Say whether the following statements are True or False.Write T for true And F for false in the bracket:

1. Democratic societies attempt to promote the cultural practices of networking. [ ]
2. Electronic mail is more important than technologies such as the www (world wide web). [ ]

3. Machinery does not reform society. [ ]
4. In an institution, focus must be on developing machinery. [ ]
5. The internet should not become a tool of oppression, but a tool for social progress. [ ]
6. Internet can help to rennovate our institution. [ ]

***Activity 2*: VOCABULARY**

A. Match the following –

A	**B**
Decentralised	logical and well organized
Mobilization	to give power to smaller parts/organizations
Coherent	working together to achieve a particular aim
Pluralistic	not working properly
Obsolete	one with a lot of experiences of the world, culture, etc.
Dysfunctional	outdated
Sophisticated	having many different groups of people and different political parties

(a) Internet has added new words to English vocabulary. Some of them are e-mail, e-commerce, web-site, etc. Enlist the words belonging to the world of internet and try to know their meanings from your teacher.

(b) Bring out the difference of meaning
Cyber Café and Cyber Space
Citizen and netizen

***Activity 3:* GRAMMAR**

Look at the following sentences

(i) If you help me, I'll buy you a beautiful dress (open condition)
(ii) If I were a cloud, I could bring a lot of rains, (imaginary condition)
(iii) If he knew about it, he would be very angry, (impossible condition)

The above sentences show that there are three types of conditional clauses - those that contain a condition that may or may not be fulfilled, they are known as open and conditional clauses; the second type of conditional clauses are those that contain a condition that may be theoretical, combined with improbability or unreality. They are called unreal conditional clauses. The unreal conditional clauses state two types of condition : (i) imaginary and (ii) impossible

Examples : Men would look odd if they had three legs.
(imaginary)

If he came earlier, he could join the party.
(impossible)

Exercise:

Put the verbs in brackets into correct tense forms :

(i) If I (be) you, I would do it.
(ii) Unless you (send) a telegram, I (not come).
(iii) If I had been in your place, I (not allow) the robbers to escape.
(iv) If you saw someone in trouble, what you (do)?
(v) If she (not use) cosmetics, she (look) more beautiful.
(vi) If I (be) the king, I would work for the welfare of mankind.
(vii) Whether you (be) here or there, I will always remember you.

Activity 4: **SPEECH ACTIVITY**

We are surrounded by the gadgets that demand our attention,constantly fragmenting our ability to properly focus on the task at hand. Living with technology doesn't mean to live with an addiction." Discuss in group the uses and drawbacks of technology.

Activity 5: **COMPOSITION**

With the powerful emergence of internet, social media has become a powerful means to mobilise the public. As a result, social media plays a virtual role in deciding the democratic destiny of a country. Write an essay on '**Social Media and General Election.**'