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Two Schools of Thought About the Political Psychology of the Internet

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Abstract. This article describes and critiques two common assumptions about the psychopolitical consequences of continual modification and dispersal of the Internet.

One significant pursuit of social scientists is the delineation of psychopolitical consequences of technological developments. Specifically, these scientists are interested in how such developments affect (1) human thoughts, emotions, motives, and behaviors; (2) political structures, processes, and functions in venues stretching from the local to the global; and (3) the interaction between (1) and (2). Of much concern are recent developments in telecommunications, specifically the continual modification and dispersal of the Internet.

One school of thought is that as the ease of Internet use, the breadth and depth of Internet content, and mass Internet dispersal increases, so should economic and political pluralism. Purveyors of this school of thought also assert that this pluralism connotes a greater number of pathways to economic success and achievement of political goals. They also assert that the pluralism connotes that more and more people will have access to economic and political success. Yet another assertion is that concurrent with these other consequences is greater political freedom and liberty. All four of these assertions are further asserted to be causally related in some sort of synergistic fashion. The main epistemological approaches towards supporting these assertions are historical analogy, the collection of anecdotes, reason, and unsystematic empirical observation.

A second school of thought is that the same aspects of the Internet described above already are leading to reification of an individual orientation at the expense of a group of collective orientation. (Or that what it takes to be economically and politically successful via the Internet leads to this reification.) Purveyors of this school of thought also assert that this reification often leads to a disintegration of traditional values that otherwise bind and coalesce social groupings, reinforce a sense of identity with the political state, provide a source of spiritual union or intangible guiding light, and effect a sense of being cast adrift without sociocultural moorings. Yet another assertion is that the reification leads to an individual and systemic decrease in concern for disparities between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots. The same epistemological approaches have been employed in supporting these assertions as those for the first school of thought above.

What are social scientists to make of the current discourse about the psychopolitical effects of the Internet? They certainly can engage in experimental techniques as a supplement to other epistemological approaches to help support or disconfirm aspects of the two schools of thought. In addition, they may seek to explore another hypothesis. The sense of freedom and liberty that may be facilitated by the Internet may exemplify a false consciousness. That is, freedom and liberty may be genuine phenomenologies that facilitate exploitation of those that experience them. In this regard it is ironic that experimental research is already being carried out to delineate the consequences of the Internet for the assessment, modification, and evaluation of psychopathology, while virtually none is addressed towards the politics (and associated epistemological approaches of high status) that may be causally implicated. (See Breslow, H. (1997). Civil society, political economy, and the Internet. In S.G.

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