Shadows on a Screen: The Inadequacies of the Internet as an Instrument for Overcoming Democratic Passivity

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by
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I. “The World at our Fingertips”: The Role of the Internet in American Political Culture

In the sixty seconds that it will take you to finish reading this page, the following events will occur: 168 million emails will be sent, 694,445 search items will be entered into Google, 695,000 Facebook statuses will be updated, 370,000 Skype calls will be initiated, 98,000 tweets will be drafted, 1,500 new blog entries will be posted, and 600 videos will be uploaded to Youtube.¹ However, in the computer-dominated age that we live in today, none of these facts should come as much of a surprise. In fact, in 2013, most Americans receive their news, are exposed to waves of information, and communicate with others using the Internet. As Konieczny (2009) puts it: “we are witnessing the spread of a new communication network, the Internet [which] has changed the way we carry out many routine tasks, and [transformed] our culture, as well.”²

 Barely 35 years since its invention, the Internet is already used by over 2.4 billion people worldwide.³ 70 percent of people use the Internet every single day. This is taking into consideration the fact that over 2.5 billion people, roughly one third of the world’s population, live below the poverty line.⁴ Exactly how do the bulk of the Earth’s people spend their time as they stare at a 15 by 9 inch LCD computer monitor? 62 percent of Internet users rely on the Internet for research purposes, 50 percent of people handle their banking online, 58 percent of people shop using the Internet, 62 percent of people find information about health online, 43 percent of people make travel

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³ The Cultureist (2013). More than 2 billion people use the Internet, here’s what they’re up to.
reservations over the Internet and 45 percent of people look for jobs online. For 72 percent of Internet users, though, their time online is devoted to social networking platforms, which are websites that allow individuals to establish social contact with new people or maintain their relations with current acquaintances. Social networking users spend, on average, 3.2 hours each day on social networking sites. The more than one billion users of Facebook, the largest social networking platform, combine to spend 10.5 billion minutes—20,000 years or 286 lifetimes—on Facebook every day. The numbers are truly astounding.

Nowhere is the epidemic of Internet use better seen than in North America, where 78.6 percent of all inhabitants use the Internet regularly. In America, a nation that strives to lead the way in technology, science, innovation and the arts, there is no doubt that the Internet holds tremendous potential, not just for our country, but also for our citizens. Cass Sunstein (2001) points this out in saying:

New technological options hold out a great deal of promise for exposure to materials that used to be too hard to find, including new topics and new points of view. If you would like to find out about different forms of cancer, and different views about possible treatments, you can do so in less than a minute. If you are interested in learning about the risks associated with different automobiles, a quick search will tell you a great deal. If you would like to know about a particular foreign country, from its customs to its politics to its weather, you can do better with the Internet than you could have done with the best of encyclopedias.

With a limitless pool of information at our fingertips, it is not unexpected that the Internet has become the leading source of political information for individuals over the last few years. The reason that the Internet has become so popular as a means of

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5 The Cultureist (2013). More than 2 billion people use the Internet, here’s what they’re up to.
7 The Cultureist (2013). More than 2 billion people use the Internet, here’s what they’re up to.
8 The Cultureist (2013). More than 2 billion people use the Internet, here’s what they’re up to.
political socialization is because it is a quick, inexpensive way of gaining access to information. Just like the television, there is no limit to the amount of information that one can view from the Internet; however, unlike TV, Internet users have the ability to control what topic they are reading about, when they are reading it, and for how long they will be reading it. The result of this is that more and more Americans are relying on the Internet to learn about politics. In fact, according to research conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project in 2008, the number of Americans citing the Internet as their first source of presidential election campaign news has increased by 23 percent since 2004.\(^\text{10}\) In addition, Pew researchers found that while mainstream news sources still dominate the online news and information gathering by campaign Internet users, a majority of them now receive political material from blogs, comedy sites, government websites, candidate websites, or alternative websites.\(^\text{11}\)

A nation like ours that prides itself on democratic ideals needs to consider the impact that changes of this magnitude could have on our democracy. Certainly, there has been an awful lot of enthusiasm about the Internet and democracy. Many scholars believe that the Internet has produced a completely distinct modern classification of democracy, which they refer to as ‘cyberdemocracy,’ ‘digital democracy,’ ‘electronic democracy’ or simply ‘Internet democracy.’ Given the properties of the Internet and its ability to provide instantaneous information on any public issue, or to enable citizens to enter into exchanges of any kind, the excitement surrounding Internet democracy certainly appears to be justified. “With its ability to put information power in the hands of the people, the Internet holds the promise for wider and more effective citizen

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participation in public affairs.”

In addition, “citizens who have access to the Internet are increasingly energized by the many opportunities for them to ask questions, enter dialogue, raise issues, tell stories and investigate current affairs.” One would not have to look very far to find claims about how the Internet has “strengthened democratic institutions,” “made it easier for citizens to monitor their elected representatives” or removed barriers for citizens to “acquire more information about a given political or social issue.”

However, in order to better understand whether the enthusiasm surrounding the advent of the Internet is justified, we only need to go back a few decades to the emergence of another progressive technological innovation: the television. When the television was first introduced in the 1960s, much of the promise encompassed by the Internet today was embodied in television. William Hoynes, summarizing the Carnegie Commission on the Future of Educational Television, noted that in its early years, public television was “to reflect the diversity of the American public… to serve as a forum for controversy and debate,’ and ‘provide a voice for groups in the community that may otherwise be unheard.’”

Certainly in the early years of television, most American citizens shared the outlook of the Carnegie Commission, presuming that television would be a tremendous opportunity for individuals to express themselves while simultaneously taking in the reality, imagery and harmony embodied in the world around them.

But for all of its admirable qualities, there were several consequences of the arrival of television that we did not expect. The majority of Americans are familiar with

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the account of the first televised presidential debate in 1960 between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. Nixon, who was suffering from the flu and still running a fever, appeared weak and frail in the debates, while Kennedy was a paradigm of vigor and brilliance. After the debate, TV viewers and radio listeners were asked who they believed won the debate; while Kennedy won over 70 million television viewers, a plurality of radio listeners believed that it was Nixon who won the debate. This discrepancy exemplified the major shortcoming of citizens’ reliance on television for political socialization. Image superseded content; it no longer mattered to viewers what was spoken; all that counted was only the face that appeared on the screen in every living room in America.

The reason behind this, as CBS Evening News Producer Susan Zirinsky remarked on the subject, is that:

Television is primarily a visual medium. This has meant that in order for networks to attract viewers they must cater to television's visual imperative…. There is a real big mandate for pieces to not be boring -- no standup, no bland-looking stuff. This need for visuals leads television news to distort the functioning of [government] by emphasizing those aspects favorable to pictures and ignoring those that are not.

Not only are citizens influenced politically by what they see on television, but there is also pressure on media elites and political representatives to gear their visual presentations towards drawing in an audience, rather than educating and enlightening the democratic citizenry. The outcome of television’s preoccupation with image over substance has led to a negligible emphasis on actual political content- in effect, depoliticization, the opposite of what it promotes, has happened.

Nevertheless, the relationship between communication and democracy shifted

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dramatically due to the onset of television. No longer were citizens interested in discovering new ways to participate in their government or engage in free expression. Their concern now lied with sensationalism- exploring and understanding the images and the pictures that generated the most buzz. News teams no longer broadcasted the issues that they felt were the most important for the public to know; they broadcasted “sensational story content, which consists of sex, scandal, crime or corruption,” topics that resonate with viewers. ‘Who was the redhead spotted with the ex-Governor at Sunday brunch’ was identified as a more pressing news item than ‘what was the outcome of the early voter registration bill in the state legislature?’ Even when depicting serious issues like soldiers’ wartime experiences, television had a tendency to ‘dramatize the bloody, tragic and horrific conflicts that may violate an audience’s comfortable distance from the perception of the world.”

As another way of relating to the average viewer, the news had a propensity for “focusing on private citizens…to personalize news sources.” These are the news stories that begin with ‘Meet Kathy- she’s only 12, but she scored a 175 on her IQ test and has shown extraordinarily fast development of her prefrontal cortex.” Television’s partiality towards singling out private citizens, rather than concentrating on the public at large, speaks to the depoliticization of television as an educational medium. It also demonstrates television’s inability to resist coverage of items that will catch viewers’ attentions, rather than educating them on relevant current issues.

For this reason, even though the Internet itself is a novel medium, the enthusiasm surrounding a new form of technology and its capacities to enhance our democracy is not. Therefore, when we evaluate the impact of the arrival of the Internet on our

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democracy, we can look to the unanticipated impacts derived from the advent of television to illustrate to us what we should expect.

However, the connection between the Internet and television goes beyond these circumstances. Research has demonstrated that the Internet has effectively replaced television as the primary political socialization tool for citizens. “The most significant change [concerning the relationship between television and politics] has been the encroachment of the Internet on the terrain hitherto dominated by television. Audiences for television, as well as other mass media, are on a downward trend.”19 With this in mind, we might wonder whether the impact that the Internet will have on our citizenry and our democracy will mirror that of television.

In order to evaluate whether the Internet has had and will have a positive or negative impact on communication in our democracy, we must first identify the characteristics of a democracy. Three pillars of a democratic society are free expression, political participation and associations, all of which share a common feature: driving citizens to be more active in public affairs. One of the claims that Internet enthusiasts make is that citizen’s reliance on the Internet will bring an end to the passivity of citizens in large-scale democracies. But several questions remain: will the Internet avoid or repeat television’s failures? Will it introduce new ones? Will it serve as an effective medium for both educating citizens and providing a forum for them to communicate with one another in a democratic environment?

In order to answer these questions, I shall draw heavily in this thesis from a surprising source written 2000 years ago: Plato’s Republic, specifically the Allegory of the Cave. The image of the Cave offers a critical perspective of how we gain knowledge

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that supplements and deepens the critiques of Internet democracy that I will put forward. It is possible that we could effectively resolve the aforementioned questions without referring to the Platonic perspective; however, in bringing Plato’s voice into the conversation, we will enrich the discussion about the Internet’s impact on democracy.

Plato’s thoughts about social communication, the distinction between knowledge and information, and the difference between being a passive receiver of information and an active shaper of knowledge, can assist us in predicting some of the consequences of Internet use on communication in democracy. Although Plato could not have predicted anything like the arrival of the Internet when he wrote in 400 B.C.E., an analysis of his work can give us an account of the value of being on the receiving end of something like the Internet. Surprisingly, one of the most insightful critiques of Internet democracy can be drawn from someone who wrote over 2,000 years before its invention.

Specifically, Plato’s Allegory of the Cave provides us with an image of the consumption of information in a similar capacity to the Internet. The prisoners’ mechanical absorption of the shadows of images of things on the walls of the Cave corresponds to the mindless consumption of information that Internet users engage in. Neither becoming immersed in images on a computer screen nor engrossing oneself in the shadows on the walls of the Cave lessens the distance between the individuals and the actual objects. In fact, in both cases, education is the only way to move us from our state of idleness to the outside world.

Ultimately, Plato’s Allegory of the Cave will assist me to make the following points about Internet democracy:

(1) Although the Internet provides us with access to a virtually unlimited pool of
information, more information does not equate to more learning; in many cases, actually, more information moves us farther away from knowledge and education.

(2) Internet sources, such as blogs, consist of layers of the opinions of others, which are read and accepted as the truth. And just like the prisoners in the Cave who stare at the shadows of images of objects on the wall, we only move further away from actual knowledge when we read these Internet sources.

(3) The Internet produces a social disconnect between its users, which is detrimental to the social capital necessitated by a democracy. Individuals searching the web are no more connected than prisoners in the Cave who happen to be exposed to the same shadows.
II. Participation, Public Affairs and the Escape From Passivity: Examining the Relationship Between Democracy and Communication

Before we evaluate the impact of the Internet on communication in our democracy, we must establish an understanding of the relationship between communication and democracy in America. Democracy, I will argue, requires at least three components: free expression, political participation and civil association. All of these characteristics share the common goal of bringing citizens closer to their government, and allowing us to escape our state of passivity, and engage in active learning and vigorous displays of democracy.

To start, freedom of expression is essential in any democracy. In fact, when the French National Assembly was drafting the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen in 1789, they stated: "The free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of man. Every citizen may, accordingly, speak, write and print with freedom..."\textsuperscript{20} Democracy is rooted in the concept that all citizens shall participate in their government equally, which requires all manners of expression.

Freedom of expression is a basic foundation of democracy—it is one of the most fundamental of all freedoms…. The term encompasses not only freedom of speech and media, but also freedom of thought, culture, and intellectual inquiry. Freedom of expression guarantees everyone's right to speak and write openly without state interference, including the right to criticize injustices, illegal activities, and incompetencies.\textsuperscript{21}

Most of all, freedom of expression helps to safeguard democracy from its most pressing dangers; it enables citizens to combat potential government tyranny with the force of words and to resist the ‘Tyranny of the Majority,’ as Tocqueville called it, by “giving

\textsuperscript{20} Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (1789).
the minority the opportunity to be heard.”

The second essential component of a democracy is political participation. Democracy literally means ‘power to the people,’ and depends on citizens to hold government officials accountable. Methods of political participation enable citizens to communicate with representatives and compel them to act on an issue. A democratic constitution assigns to citizens the right to participate in the nation’s affairs either directly or indirectly. Citizens have the ability to exercise their vote in local, state and federal elections, to organize and assemble with other citizens to support or oppose a cause, to reach out to their representatives, to issue petitions; the avenues that citizens can utilize to participate in a democratic government are practically inexhaustible. As Arterton (1988) notes: “if the objective of democratic politics is to nurture the general will of the citizenry, participation provides the best means of ensuring that the needs and desires of citizens will merge into consensus.”

The third element of democracy, and the feature that is the most pertinent to assessing the impact of the Internet on American democracy, is the civil association. In order to exercise freedom of expression and to participate in government, it is certainly of practical value to organize with others and focus on public affairs. This, as political theorist Alexis de Tocqueville argued, is the precise function of the civil association:

Through participation in associations, citizens both receive an education in public affairs and create centers of political power independent of the state. Essential to participation in an association is participation in a forum, a communication space that allows for many-to-many communication in which citizens can treat of public affairs in public.

Like Plato, Tocqueville was concerned with citizens becoming passive about

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their government. Tocqueville, however, believed that individualism was at the root of this problem, and civil associations could solve it:

Citizens in democracies often suffer from ‘excessive individualism,’ the tendency to focus exclusively on private affairs and to neglect public affairs: ‘Individualism . . . disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellows and to draw apart with his family and friends so that . . . he willingly leaves society at large to itself.’ When citizens neglect public affairs, rule by the many can become rule by a few. Politics becomes the domain of a few groups, individuals, or institutions, and this subset of the society may eventually tyrannize an atomized and apathetic citizenry.  

To address this individualism that was causing citizens to neglect their democratic obligations, Tocqueville urged people to move outside of their homes and assemble in order to focus on public affairs. In this sense, Tocqueville argued that civil associations combat citizen passivity. “By uniting individuals with a common agenda and common interests in a group, an association counteracts citizens’ tendencies toward excessive individualism and neglect of public affairs.” Forming this community, to Tocqueville, was central to a democracy.

In this sense, Tocqueville argued that civil associations combat citizen apathy.

Associations reinforce democracy in two ways. First, they educate citizens in political participation. An active and informed citizenry is a prerequisite for effective popular sovereignty, and participation in associations reminds citizens of the importance of public affairs to their own private affairs . . . Second, associations are a political force in their own right. As citizens combine in collectivities, they create peripheral centers of power independent of central state institutions . . . By dispersing power more broadly in society, associations counteract the centralization of power. Without associations democracy might perish.

Nevertheless, it is clear that civil associations perform a critical function in a democratic society; but how do they actually work? Tocqueville asserted that through

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public forums, citizens could share ideas relevant to public affairs and participate in public decision-making. “A forum is a means of many-to-many communication that allows citizens to actively speak before their fellows and to engage in group decision making. In a forum, citizens ‘treat of public affairs in public,’ speaking in front of other citizens and thereby educating themselves in participatory democracy.”

But civil associations and public forums are not the same thing. Although they share the same outcome, in that they drive citizens out of the home and encourage them to be involved in public affairs, there is a clear distinction. Public forums represent settings where citizens can discuss matters of public interest. On the other hand, civil associations do not need to be locations where citizens can debate the public good. Civil associations can be clubs, organizations or interest groups where individuals work together to pursue a common interest among them. While a public forum deals with public interests, civil associations handle special interests or self-interests. The end result of civil associations, though, is that citizens end up paying more attention to public affairs, as with public forums. However, the initial driving force is not a desire to serve the public good, but rather to serve oneself. Nevertheless, both public forums and civil associations are beneficial for democracy in that they integrate the other two pillars of democracy – political participation and freedom of expression – into a system where citizens can effectuate change in their government by working with other members of the populace.

Tocqueville identifies two key models for democratic forums, the meeting hall and the newspaper. The meeting hall, in Tocqueville’s view:

…Is a true forum, in that it allows participants to meet and engage in face-to-face communication.

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communication. Many-to-many communication is achieved in direct and immediate form. Tocqueville refers to ‘the power of meeting’ that arises because ‘[members] have the opportunity of seeing one another; means of execution are combined; and opinions are maintained with a warmth and energy that written language can never attain.’ Participation in public affairs is at its fullest with this type of forum.

However, since a meeting hall suffers from barriers of space and time, Tocqueville named a second medium for public forums: the newspaper. In theory, the newspaper would allow members to:

‘Converse every day without seeing one another, and to take steps in common without having met.’ A newspaper can unite many members in daily communication, thereby maintaining the unity needed for effective citizen action. Indeed, so vital are newspapers that Tocqueville declares a necessary connection between them and associations: ‘newspapers make associations, and associations make newspapers.’

Newspapers overcome many of the challenges posed by the meeting hall. They “overcome geographical barriers to communication because they do not require readers to assemble in a common location. They also impose little need for synchronization, and they are low in cost.”

However, for all of its virtues, newspapers do not allow for the same communicative value that meeting halls do.

The act of reading a newspaper offers a less participative experience than does attendance at a meeting, and as a result its educational and solidarity-enhancing benefits are less. Although it is a social medium that is supportive of the public sphere, a newspaper cannot substitute for a meeting. While it overcomes barriers of space, time, and cost, it does not allow for many-to-many communication.

Nevertheless, civil associations are central components of a democracy, and public forums are “the means by which participants educate themselves in public affairs.

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and formulate collective positions.\textsuperscript{33}

In 2013, we have the opportunity to expand public forums beyond newspapers and meeting halls. “As new communication media have emerged since the time of Tocqueville’s writing, they have created new opportunities for a variety of political practices… the recent emergence of the Internet offers additional novel opportunities.”\textsuperscript{34}

But just as there were costs and benefits to the transition to the newspaper as a public forum, reliance on the Internet as a medium for civil associations raises new issues about the fundamental value of associational space – specifically whether there is value to individuals being brought together in virtual space, as opposed to physical space. In essence, can the public forums and civil associations that Tocqueville outlined be effective instruments for democracy if they were to take place online? This question depends on whether active learning can take place over the Internet, and whether the Internet can function as a sound alternative to traditional means of political participation and civil association. Both of these questions will be addressed later in the paper.

III. Breaking Barriers and Cutting Costs of Communication: The Bright Side of Internet Democracy

Does the Internet fortify or detract from the democratic nature of our society? The vast majority of literature in the contemporary political theory field right now suggests that there is value in the Internet not only as an apparatus for the simplification of communication, but also as a tool to streamline the distribution of information, and lower the cost of political participation for the populace.

The central claim offered to defend Internet democracy is rooted in the Internet’s convenience as a method of communication. Conventional methods of communication - in-person conversations, letters, telephone calls -- are usually one-to-one, meaning only two people can participate in this communicative medium. This is generally an efficient model for disseminating and receiving information. In contrast, the Internet allows for a more effectual model of communication- many-to-many communication – the differences between the two models are demonstrated in the visual below:

In the one-to-one communication component of the diagram on the previous page, the person on top who is distributing information is illustrated as being larger than

35 http://socialwebsquire.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/manytomany.jpg?w=400&h=234.
the others. This signifies that all of the other people who are on the receiving end of the communication only have access to him and him alone. Therefore, he holds all the power since he is the one who controls the channel of communication. This is neither democratic nor is it an equal form of communicating. On the other hand, in the many-to-many communication visual to the right, every individual is displayed as being of equal size and status. All of these people have equal access to one another, and no one person has more influence over this system than the other. This speaks to the value of equality in our democracy, which Internet enthusiasts argue that the Internet upholds.

But how exactly does the Internet engender many-to-many communication? By allowing for the formation of newsgroups and listservs, participants can both “post messages in a common message area, and enable subscribers of a mailing list to send messages to all other subscribers,” respectively.\(^{36}\) This provides a new public forum and “opens new possibilities for citizen associations,” both of which are essential in any democracy.\(^{37}\) Supporters of Internet democracy also affirm that “networking via computers facilitates communication among a larger number and broader spectrum of individuals, enabling people from different remote locations to associate with each other, to engage in economic transactions and political debates, and, more generally, to make their opinions matter by having their voices heard.”\(^{38}\) Individuals no longer need to engage in face-to-face meetings to communicate, as Saco (2002) asserts. Everyone everywhere can express their ideas over the Internet, thus boosting the aggregate freedom of expression, a crucial democratic principle.

This relates to the second claim made in favor of Internet democracy: the

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Internet is freer from barriers of space or time than other forms of communication. No longer do participants need to assemble in a single setting, which obviously poses a number of challenges for everyone involved, to communicate – they can do so anywhere. The Internet is superior to old-fashioned meeting halls for this very reason: it is freer from constraints of time and space: “communication in an online forum does not require close synchronization between participants, so it is much easier for large numbers of people to participate. This avoids the temporal barriers of a meeting-hall forum. It also brings greater continuity to associations by allowing discussion to continue during interludes between face-to-face meetings.”\textsuperscript{39} For this reason, Internet communication is more inclusive than communication in meeting halls. Since it is difficult to accommodate everyone’s schedules, those conversations become exclusive to those who have the resources to attend. Thus, people who do not have the time or resources to go are effectively silenced, thereby losing their freedom of expression. On the other hand, “by allowing a higher degree of participation to larger numbers of people than was previously possible, online forums enable associations to attract and keep larger numbers of committed members than would otherwise be possible (other things being equal).”\textsuperscript{40}

Additionally, since the Internet does not require a great sacrifice of time or effort, it is not only all-inclusive, but it lowers the cost of political participation for everyone. Lowering the cost of political participation entails removing all unnecessary steps and ensuring that citizens put forth the least effort possible to achieve maximum results. With the Internet, “participants can avoid the expense of transporting themselves

to the meeting hall… instead of rearranging their schedules to attend a group meeting, they can read others’ messages at their convenience.” Internet users also save time with virtual communication; citizens can focus on those messages that they consider more important, and tune out the rest. Therefore, participation in an online forum “consumes less of each participant’s limited resources.” Basically, advocates of Internet democracy affirm that we should embrace modern technology, and adapt to it, rather than adhering to traditional practices. If we have technology that enables us to communicate with one another without needing to sacrifice our time and resources to do in person, there is no reason why we ought not to utilize it.

Besides this, proponents of the Internet contend that the Internet “democratizes information by simplifying the creation, duplication, storage, and distribution of data.” This simplification of access to information again reduces the costs of participation in democracy. Citizens now have the ability to “reproduce and distribute documents online, instead of photocopying. They can also access information sources previously available only through libraries.” Nevertheless, the Internet is known by many to be a “great enabler of education- one of the foundations of democracy,” since Internet democracy advocates also affirm that the Internet produces learning in its users. It does this by providing citizens with exposure to political information in general. In fact, according to research conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project in 2008, the number of Americans citing the Internet as their first source of presidential election

campaign news has increased 23 percent since 2004. Pew researchers also discovered that “while mainstream news sources still dominate the online news and information gathering by campaign Internet users, a majority of them now get political material from blogs, comedy sites, government websites, candidate sites, or alternative sites.”

Because information is so easily accessible on the Internet, an increasing number of citizens rely on the Internet not only to learn about their government, but to engage with it. “Increasing numbers of citizens use [the Internet] … discuss issues with one another, contact elected officials and obtain voter registration materials and other information that can facilitate more active participation in politics. All observers of the current scene agree that the Net is dramatically expanding access to politically relevant information and offering citizens new possibilities for political learning and action.”

The Internet, many believe, also has the ability to “ward the apathy and alienation” that Americans feel towards our democracy. But again- how effective is this form of communication as a substitute for Tocqueville’s traditional civil associations? Enthusiasts of Internet democracy turn to specific case studies to make the point that the Internet can serve as an effective form of a civil association. One case study, TPR-NE, or the Telecommunications Policy Roundtable-Northeast (TPR-NE) involved “a participatory association of citizens, nonprofit organizations, and public interest groups that joined together to exchange information and promote common positions on issues in federal legislation.” TPR-NE volunteers reached out to Massachusetts state legislators in their districts to effectuate policy change. To

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accomplish their goal, TPR-NE relied heavily on the Internet “to identify and attract individuals and groups sharing an interest in telecommunications.”51 As a result of the case study, the Internet was shown to be a strong ‘beacon’ to attract like-minded citizens and to “provide a means to proactively solicit participation.”52

How did TPR-NE achieve this? Leaders of the association set up their own listserv, which “proved useful for discussing plans of action, distributing legislative analyses from Washington, disseminating minutes of meetings, and effectively publicizing TPR-NE’s existence to communities not addressed in the original messages.” In addition, “the listserv greatly facilitated administration. TPR-NE participants held occasional face-to-face meetings, which required that they agree on a common time, an agenda, and other details. Use of the listserv rendered these mundane and potentially time-consuming chores much easier. Many-to-many communication allowed the group to self-organize rather than to rely on a designated administrator.”53

Having established a framework for fulfilling their objectives of promoting common positions on federal legislative issues and attracting individuals sharing an interest in telecommunications, the second stage of TPR-NE was publicizing their events:

The TPR-NE hosted a series of speaker panels on policy issues… [which] covered such topics as access to information infrastructure, journalism on the Internet, libraries’ and towns’ use of information infrastructure, and most importantly, the telecommunications reforms under way in Congress. The Internet provided a low-cost, effective means of publicizing these events. It took little time or money to reach a wide audience.54

In addition to this, the Internet enabled TPR-NE to overcome traditional barriers to

these speaker events, such as low attendance; “shortly after each [event], a summary and review could be posted, so that the many people who did not attend could still derive some benefit.”

In less than a year, “TPR-NE established itself as the focal point for grassroots telecommunications policy activism in the Boston area. With nearly 200 subscribers to its listserv, a core group of about a dozen participating organizations, and up to 50 people attending its speaker panels, TPR-NE could legitimately claim to be a voice for the public interest.” By drawing on the Internet as a public forum, it had succeeded in producing democratic responses in citizens in Boston. “It had educated the public in the issues. It had voiced concerns to Massachusetts legislators, contributing to legislative outcomes… TPR-NE had succeeded as a association for citizen participation in public affairs.”

Advocates of Internet democracy point to TPR-NE’s utilization of text messages and emails to illustrate the efficacy of these methods of communication. What distinguishes email communication from more conventional methods? “In a meeting-hall forum a listener must listen to all speakers, for the speaker controls the duration of his or her communication.” Once again, this presents a barrier to political participation, since not every citizen has the flexibility in their schedule to listen to an entire series of dialogues; the result of this is that individuals are deterred from participating in the forums altogether. On the other hand, with email and text message communication, participants have the ability to examine the messages and determine for themselves how much time they would like to spend engaging with the materials. The

speaker no longer holds the control; “with text messages the speaker and the listener share control. Recipients of e-mail could decide whether to read messages fully, skim over them, or skip them entirely.”

Therefore, the Internet not only provides more efficient communication, but freer communication as well, since individuals now have the opportunity to decide how much of the information presented to them that they want to pay attention to.

Enthusiasts of Internet democracy also claim that the Internet will increase citizen participation in public affairs. Due to its “low cost, ease of use, and broad diffusion, the Internet overcomes some of the barriers that hindered the democratic use of previous technologies.” For this reason, Internet-based civic networks have been highly successful in promoting greater citizen involvement. Specifically, “online activists participating in petition campaigns, elections, and other activities have achieved some notable successes.”

In addition, in the event of a crisis, communities can be more readily mobilized using the Internet as an instrument of unification:

A citizen action can be announced on existing listservs in order to attract participants, and a forum can be created quickly at nearly no cost to participants. The same flexibility that computerization has brought to industry can now be realized by associations, with the result that grassroots movements may quickly coalesce in response to emerging issues.

Therefore, advocates of Internet democracy affirm that the Internet has the potential to augment citizen responsiveness in his or her community.

Finally, supporters of Internet democracy contend that the Internet broadens our opportunities to meet new people. “The Internet,” Uslaner (2003) alleges, “lets us connect with people with shared interests whom we otherwise would not meet. The

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Internet is the great leveler of class and race barriers—which have proven to be strong barriers to effective participation in American. Our net contacts may come from different backgrounds or live far away from us. Thus, not only are we connecting with new people, but we are connecting with others whom we would never have met due to the barriers imposed by space. For this reason, again, proponents of the Internet affirm that it encourages freer communication, since not only are we choosing the content of the information that we want to highlight, but the source as well. We are no longer limited to communicating with those in our geographic area. “The Net promotes the ability of people to associate freely with others who share their views and interests, regardless of where they are located, and to share information with them, to take common cause with them, and to jointly advance their mutual political or other agendas.”

The impact of these structures on society, supporters of Internet democracy contend, is that communities become more unified and citizens demonstrate higher levels of involvement with their government. People who use the Internet for information are slightly more likely to get involved in their communities and are significantly more likely to trust other people compared to people who use the Net for other reasons ranging from chat rooms to buying goods. In essence, advocates of Internet democracy emphasize that those who view the Internet as a mechanism for free association or promotion of a cause, such as the participants of the TPR-NE case study, should experience greater community involvement and political engagement as a result.

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IV. Prisoners, Puppet-Masters and Philosopher-Kings: Deconstructing Plato’s Allegory of the Cave

We will turn now, as I suggested in the introduction, to Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. I am drawing on Plato in order to develop a more complete understanding of the Internet’s influence in a democratic society. Plato’s Allegory of the Cave is the quintessential model of social learning and will provide us with a critical perspective in regards to the way that we gain knowledge.

In Plato’s Republic, Plato constructs the image of the Cave as part of his objective in the novel to delineate justice, and to demonstrate that justice is intrinsically valuable. Plato first establishes a just society and surmises that justice is when every member of society minds his or her own business and does not act as a busybody. He then concentrates on justice within the individual and contends that every individual’s soul has three components: a rational part, a spirited part and an appetitive part. He suggests that for a person to be just, the rational part of the soul must remain in control of the appetitive. After this, Plato discusses the ways in which these individuals interact with the world around them and how they obtain knowledge. Plato illustrates his Theory of the Forms, as he reasons that the forms are not visible to the human eye, but are perceptible independently of our sensory experience. The only people who can achieve true knowledge are those who can realize the Forms: the philosopher-kings. Plato uses the Allegory of the Cave to show how the philosopher-kings can grasp the Form of the Good, by escaping the condition that all humans have inhabited for their entire lives: the Cave.

The Allegory of the Cave begins with a description of three men who have lived

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in a cave since birth, having never seen the light of day. Their arms and legs are bound so that they can only see what is in front of them and nothing else. The three men watch shadows of objects, animals and men moving across the screen in front of them, which they have no choice but to accept as reality. However, unbeknownst to them, there is a fire behind them, and behind the fire there is a wall. There are statues on top of the wall that are manipulated by puppeteers. The images that the prisoners see before them are shadows resulting from the statues. However, the prisoners, for whom the Cave is the only reality that they’ve ever known, believe them to be real. A simplified version of this is depicted in the diagram on the following page:
When one prisoner escapes from his bondage and is freed, he sees the fire and statues behind him and realizes that the images that he previously accepted as reality were mere illusions. The prisoner then exits the Cave, the sun burning his eyes, and notices his natural surroundings, the trees and the flowers, which he recognizes as more

67 http://www.sovereignindependentuk.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/bbbbbbb1.jpg
real than anything that was in the Cave.

Plato summarizes this part of the Allegory of the Cave in stating:

And now look again, and see what will naturally follow it: the prisoners are released and disabused of their error. At first, when any of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round and walk and look towards the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows; and then conceive some one saying to him, that what he saw before was an illusion, but that now, when he is approaching nearer to being and his eye is turned towards more real existence. 68

Even having escaped, the prisoner eventually returns to the Cave to share his revelations with the other two prisoners. Upon doing so, he is dismayed to realize that neither of them believe him, since the shadows on the wall are the only reality that they have ever known, and all that will ever exist in their minds. Even though he will fail to change the minds of the other prisoners and get them to see their Cave reality for what it is, he still must re-enter the Cave “with his eyes full of darkness,” now knowing that the true reality lies outside the Cave. 69 Only by comparing the reality that he saw in the light with his former reality in the Cave can the Philosopher-King experience true education.

In order to better understand the allegory, we need to assess what Plato intended to show with this portrayal of life in the Cave. Let us first address Plato’s metaphor of prisoners chained up in the Cave. In reality, of course, Plato is not attempting to convey his belief that every one of us is chained within an actual Cave. However, his message here is that in order to be educated, we must stare at the shadows of images on the walls—we need to look at the same scene that others are looking at. And what exactly are

others looking at? Or moreover, what do the shadows of images of things really represent? These are the views and opinions of everyone in the world: their writings, speeches, books, poems, works of art, plays, movies- any of the means through which others express their ideas or opinions. All of the opinions of the people in the world around us shape our lives, and flash continually on the wall.

But why exactly must we pay attention to what others are looking at? Plato argues that we cannot afford to ignore the opinions of others around us. None of us is born fully mature, capable of reasoning for himself or herself. We were not born, like Athena, from the head of Zeus, so from a young age, we need to observe the opinions of others so that we prepare ourselves for the time when we will be able to make our own decisions. The unintended consequence of this is that we tend to reproduce every single person’s opinions in the world around us and internalize their beliefs. Then, once we turn mature and we are old enough to think for ourselves and form our own judgments, we already have established personal connections and we are dependent on others; these two sentiments guide all of our decision-making. Thus, we continue looking at the walls of the Cave, as Plato asserts, because we cannot and we do not want to, abandon what we know or whom we know.

Beyond this, the second major reason that we are ‘chained’ to the Cave has to do with the pursuit of self-interest. In order to succeed in our lives, we must adhere to the ‘rules of the game.’ To achieve economic prosperity, we need to ‘dress for success,’ format our resumes a certain way, and speak in a particular manner during interviews. To achieve social success, we also need to adjust our appearances to make ourselves desirable to others. Any form of success in our lives is dependent on our ability to
follow a standard in some way. This is the metaphorical chain that Plato is referring to. Nevertheless, we are chained to the cave for two reasons: (1) because we cannot afford to ignore the opinions of others from a young age, and (2) for the pursuit of self-interest.

Next, we need to better understand what Plato means when he writes that the prisoners are unable to look away from the images on the wall. Once again, if we look beneath the literal portrayal of this account, it becomes clear that Plato’s message is that throughout our lifetimes, we receive information from a wide variety of sources; in Platonic terms, we are basically staring at many walls and viewing a ton of distinct images through this process.

But what we are really seeing in examining this information is *shadows* of *images of things* constructed by others. We are not actually seeing the objects themselves, just as the prisoners in the Cave are not actually looking at the assorted items, but their shadows. But a photograph of a moss patch is not the moss patch itself, a painting of a sunset is not a sunset, and a shadow of a glass brings us no closer to the actual glass. What we are doing, in Plato’s view, is adding layers of distance between the objects and ourselves. When the men in the Cave are staring at the shadows, even though they accept them as reality, they are only growing farther away from the actual objects and from the knowledge that they seek.

What do these shadows really represent? They signify the reflections of other people’s opinions of things. First, we have someone’s opinion of what a sunset looks like. Then, we have the representation of this person’s opinion. And then, we have our subjective interpretation of another person’s representation. Thus, we are not experiencing the sunset, but the mediation of other people’s opinions. We are distancing
ourselves from the object through layers and layers of other people’s opinions.

This is a crucial point that will be integral to our analysis of the Internet later, so I would like to go into greater detail here. Plato is arguing that we are constantly being bombarded with things that reflect other peoples’ opinions, whether it be a painting of orange juice or a drawing of a coffee mug. We accept these opinions as undisputed facts, when in reality, they are really the subjective perceptions of other individuals. Person A and Person B’s illustrations of the same chair are bound to be different from one another. And when Person C picks up Person A’s drawing, and illustrates his own interpretation of the chair based on this, it is definitely going to be different than the actual chair.

It is similar to the children’s game, ‘telephone,’ in which children sit in a circle and whisper a phrase to one another. The first person begins with a phrase, for example: “Scott had a snail for supper on Tuesday,” and whispers this to the second person only one time. Then, the second person whispers the same phrase, just as he heard it, to the third person, and so on. When the last person hears the phrase, he is supposed to say it out loud. Almost always, when the game is played, when the last person reads the phrase out loud, it is completely different from the original phrase. “Scott had a snail for supper on Tuesday” becomes “Rob impaled the muppet’s due date,” a sentence with an entirely different meaning than the original. This happens because a few people mishear the phrase from the previous person, and in turn, they pass on the incorrect phrase. At that point, it is too late, and the incorrect phrase is already being duplicated and propagated to the next dozen people. It is the same things with images of things for Plato. One person receives another person’s opinions, just as the other person expressed
them, and accepts these opinions as fact. He then passes the opinions onto the next person, and the cycle continues. The end result is that the painting of a chair or sunset ends up being nothing like the original chair or sunset because it has been surrounded by so many layers of opinion. This is just like when the last person in the circle reads the phrase out loud, it is not at all like the phrase that the group started with.

How do the puppet-masters fit into this? They are the ones that project the shadows of images of things onto the walls. However, they are far from immune to this process. The puppeteers are image-makers, but they, too, must pay attention to the walls of the Cave, in order to figure out what images to create for the prisoners. A fitting example of this is movie directors. If you are a film director who sets out to produce a movie that will win the Academy Award for Best Picture, perhaps the highest honor in all of the industry, you would not follow your own blind creative impulses. In contrast, you would likely look at past Academy Award Best Picture recipients and examine the approach that those directors took and model your movie after that. You might also utilize specific themes, plot points, or characters that you felt would resonate with the panel of thousands of film personnel who work in the film industry and comprise ‘the Academy.’ In this sense, you would be choosing to stare at the shadows of images on the wall in front of you, rather than looking away, and duplicating the approaches of other movie directors, or puppet-masters, before you.

A film director, in this sense, is a puppet-master, because he creates images that other people will look at and model their movies (and opinions) after. However, he is also a prisoner in the Cave, because he shapes his movies based on what other people want. He has been the prisoner in the Cave before, the average movie-watching adult.
He has seen these images on the screen before, watched other movies, and knows what he must do in order to succeed (and again, to reiterate a previous point, everyone must look at the walls of the Cave in order to understand what it takes to succeed).

Nevertheless, the puppeteer has been watching the shadows of images on the wall, which are other people’s interpretations and reflections, and he creates his movie based on it. Other directors will then subsequently watch the puppet-master or director’s movie and model their movies after this. Thus, film directors (and image-makers on the whole) both shape opinion and bow to it.

But the issue with all of this is that this moves us farther and farther away from the truth. We do not have a movie with just talk, what Plato might define as ‘truth’ – the movie needs a warehouse explosion, or a shoot-out. What kind of explosion or shoot-out? The kind from the last movie. Why? Because that’s what needs to be done for the movie to succeed. Everyone is staring at the images on the wall; even those who perpetuate it fall victim to it. And each time, there are more layers being added to it, more opinions, more people sitting in the ‘telephone’ circle to mishear phrases and reproduce them, and ultimately: more distance.

Again, the point here is not to say that the reproduction of the image of the sunset is not as good as the actual thing, or that an image of orange juice is not as refreshing as an actual glass of orange juice (although this certainly may be true). The issue is that when puppet-masters construct an image in such a way that it reflects their own opinions of what beauty can be, it leaves no room for interpretation on the part of the viewer. The beliefs and perceptions of others are imposed on the viewer and taken as fact. The viewer does not speculate on what the image was before it arrived in front
of him or her. It would be just as improbable for him or her to do that as it would be for the child that hears “Rob impaled the muppet’s due date” in the game of telephone to deduce what the statement was at the beginning of the game. This is the dilemma that both preserves Plato’s Cave and keeps every person imprisoned in it… except those who escape.

In the Allegory of the Cave, after one prisoner escapes from his bondage and ventures into the outside world, the prisoner eventually returns to the Cave to share his revelations with the other two prisoners. Upon doing so, he is dismayed to realize that neither of them believe him, since the shadows on the wall are the only reality that they have ever known, and all that will ever exist in their minds.

Why do the prisoners reject the philosopher when he returns to the Cave? The prisoners are convinced that they are the ones who have real knowledge. Not only is the wall of the Cave the only reality that they have known, but they have seen the benefits of looking at the walls of the Cave. They know that looking at the walls of the Cave is necessary for success; to get the high-paying job, to win the Academy Award, or simply to earn the respect of your friends and acquaintances, you need to keep staring at the wall. And so when the philosopher-king returns to the Cave with the news that the prisoners’ entire life as understood through the walls of the Cave is a lie, and that their knowledge amounts to layers of opinion from others, unsurprisingly, they have difficulty believing him.

With the Allegory of the Cave, Plato aims to show that most people live in a world of ignorance, and that we are quite comfortable being ignorant, since it is all that we know. We are so ignorant, in fact, that when faced with the truth, we will not accept
it since it run contrary to our life’s knowledge and experiences. But let me emphasize something -- we are not ignorant in the absence of information, but instead ignorant due to an overflow of information. This is a critical distinction to note, one which I will explain in greater detail in the next section in its application to the Internet.

Nevertheless, Plato’s Cave provides us with a powerful image of education, an image that focuses on not only how we take in information, but on the impact of unrestricted information (information overload). From Plato, we can infer what genuine education is and what it is not, as well as how we can draw on education in order to become active, rather than idle, members of a democratic populace. Drawing on Plato also allows us to answer questions such as: how do you seek truth? And how exactly can you work your way through layers and layers of opinion to get to the truth? Plato argues that we need to turn away from the shadows of images on the walls of the Cave in order to attain actual knowledge. Real education involves looking away from the Cave in order to engage in critical self-examination. If we do not reflect, we cannot learn. Plato argues that through this process of education, we can drag ourselves far out of the Cave, far away from ignorance, and towards the magnanimous light of truth.

The key to all of this, though, is education, a process that involves actually looking away from the shadows of images in the Cave. Staring at the shadows themselves is a form of passive behavior, but true education, turning away from these shadows of images, is not.
V. Confined to the Cave: The Reality of the Internet as an Instrument for Political Learning and Communication

Up to this point, I have surmised that in order for the Internet to be beneficial to our democracy, it must enhance our freedom of expression, political participation and civil associations, while driving us away from our innate passivity towards our government. Most importantly, though, the Internet must serve as a genuine facilitator of education, rather than a device for merely gaining information, and it must compel us to engage with our government.

The image of Plato’s Cave can enable us to understand how we receive information from the Internet and whether this qualifies as education or simple stimulus exposure. The passive consumption of information is not limited to illusory prisoners trapped in a Cave staring at shadows of images on the walls – every single one of us participates in this passive ingestion of facts, figures, and opinion nearly every day. Using the Internet, citizens ‘surfing the web’ passively consume information, skimming articles and blogs, but never directly engaging with them. They stare at the shadows of images on the wall of the Cave, but cannot bring themselves to turn away. These are not the forums or the means of civil association that Tocqueville spoke of in order to diminish the individualism that threatened democracy – this does not strengthen our education, our communication or our democracy. In fact, this kind of passivity threatens to impair our democracy altogether.

With this in mind, I will argue in this section that:

(1) The Internet exploits our psychological need to seek information,

(2) The Internet privatizes information, and the result is depoliticization,
(3) The Internet leads users to experience information overload,

(4) The Internet is flawed in the quality of its sources, which are constituted by layers and layers of opinion, and

(5) The Internet produces a social disconnect between its users, which is harmful for our democracy.

**Argument 1: The Internet exploits our psychological need to seek information.**

To this point, I have argued that citizens’ reliance on the Internet is beneficial insofar as it enables citizens to participate in their government, communicate with one another, and educate themselves. Before we explore the extent to which the Internet achieves these goals, I would like to draw attention to a distinct property of the Internet, and that is its propensity for psychological addiction. Internet users often cannot control their Internet use due to the addictive quality of the Internet.

In general, as human beings, we seek as much information as possible. In our personal lives, we strive to learn as much about ourselves as we can; in our social lives, we attempt to meet and connect with others as much as possible. We are constantly reading, watching television, and exposing ourselves to various forms of arts and media in an attempt to build cultural capital. All of these things are manifestations of our attempts to accrue the most expansive working base of knowledge that we can.

Why do we do this? It could be to increase our self-worth, or simply because it is useful. Or maybe for some of us, it could be to prepare for a future cameo appearance on *Who Wants to Be A Millionaire*. Psychologists, on the other hand, believe that we seek so much information as a way of gaining as much control over our lives as
possible. The psychological basis for this is the neurotransmitter, dopamine, which controls our brain’s pleasure systems, motivates us, and induces hunger, as well as our sex drives.

What these biological pathways do is make us susceptible to a specific type of behavior: information-seeking. We have good reason to seek information – Plato and psychologists agree that we stare the walls of the Cave (in other words, seek information) because we cannot afford to do otherwise, and that we seek information due to our desire to obtain control over our lives. Either way, we now know that there is a biological basis to this as well.

The result of the activation of these dopamine pathways is endless web-surfing, endless browsing through Wikipedia pages, as we go from the name of a 1998 comedy film to a city in California to a department of the U.S. government to a species of fruit fly. For those of us who rely on websites such as USAToday.com for our “news,” clicking a dozen articles about an outbreak of West Nile Virus in Africa, a story of the relationship between a Black Labrador and a child with Down Syndrome, an economist’s take on the stimulus package, or the growth of social media over the last few years. We find ourselves on a mission to absorb every fact out there that we can – we do not fully read any of these accounts, we simply click on them, briefly skim through the headline and the bylines in bold font, check out any pictures if they’re posted, and move onto the next one. We embark on a never-ending task to take in as much information as we can, but we never end up being satisfied. We always walk away wanting more.

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70 Weinschenk, S. (2009). 100 things you should know about people: #8- Dopamine makes you addicted to seeking information. p. 1.
71 Weinschenk, S. (2009). 100 things you should know about people: #8- Dopamine makes you addicted to seeking information. p. 1.
The result of this is that you go through a kind of information withdrawal when you are not engaging in this information-seeking behavior:

When you check your information, when you get a buzz in your pocket, when you get a ring — you get what they call a dopamine squirt. You get a little rush of adrenaline… well, guess what happens in its absence? You feel bored. You're conditioned by a neurological response: ‘Check me check me check me check me.’

This does not just apply to the Internet: it applies to our dependence on technology in general. Eventually, we end up turning to technology such as the Internet, not even just to seek information, but to avoid the withdrawal that we feel when we are not engaging in this behavior.

Nevertheless, new research shows that dopamine tends to “increase our goal-directed behavior… makes us curious about ideas, and fuels our searching for information.” But the issue with our dopamine pathways is that they do not know when to stop. “Research shows that the dopamine system doesn’t have satiety built in. It is possible for the dopamine system to keep pushing us to seek more “even when we have found the information [we were looking for].” This is where the Internet’s strengths become weaknesses. All of the Internet’s virtues – its measure of convenience, its inexpensive monetary and temporal cost – reinforce this information-seeking cycle. Because there is no drawback to carrying on with this behavior, we continue clicking away on the Internet, exposing ourselves to an awful lot of information. On a mission to absorb every fact that we can, we continue seeking out more and more information. And since we are in an age where anything we could ever want to know is at the tip of our fingers thanks to search engines like Google, there is

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73 Weinschenk, S. (2009). 100 things you should know about people: #8- Dopamine makes you addicted to seeking information. p. 2.
74 Weinschenk, S. (2009). 100 things you should know about people: #8- Dopamine makes you addicted to seeking information. p. 2.
absolutely no limitation to our hunger for new information.

But when you eat too much, inevitably, you get a stomachache. And the result of this never-ending information-seeking behavior, we enter “a dopamine induced loop… dopamine starts us seeking, then we get rewarded for the seeking which makes us seek more. It becomes harder and harder to stop looking at email, stop texting, stop checking our cell phones to see if we have a message or a new text.”75 This is the underlying addictive quality of the Internet. However, it is not just a physiological need that Internet users have – it is a psychological need to attain more information that runs counter to a democracy. Just as the prisoners in the Cave only stare at more and more images, we are not obtaining any knowledge from endlessly clicking away, but instead mere satisfaction from seeing more images. We are not motivated by a desire for education, but a need to gain access to information.

But this physiological and psychological explanation is only part of the equation. The reason why we allow ourselves to be a part of this process is because of our need for control. The plain irony, though, is that we want information because we want control. The more information we get, though, the less control we actually have.

This point highlights the distinction between gaining access to information and educating oneself. Gaining access to information can be understood by the prisoners staring at the shadows of images of walls in the Cave- they have no choice but to stare at the images ahead, they have no desire but to educate themselves, and they simply have a need to keep looking at what is right in front of them. This is the same sensation Internet users experience when staring at the computer screen. Education, in both cases, is turning away from the source of information – the Internet and the wall of the cave.

75 Weinschenk, S. (2009). 100 things you should know about people: #8- Dopamine makes you addicted to seeking information. p. 3.
Now that we have identified the psychological need for seeking information that the Internet creates, as well as the distinction between exposure to information and educational attainment, we can assess the impact that the Internet has on its users’ understanding of democratic principles, and political participation in general.

**Argument 2: The Internet privatizes information, and the result is depoliticization.**

One of the major implications of the infiltration of the Internet into modern society was the movement of the politics out of the public sphere. Television, as we have already discussed, had the same impact in that it moved politics into the living room:

Since, by definition, politics takes place in the public domain, involving societies in discussions, negotiations, struggles over public issues and concerns, its natural locus must be in the public arena. Yet, television imported it into the living room and turned it into a parlor game played by small and quasi-intimate circles. The societal aspect of politics was thus diminished and the bonding effects of public debated attenuated.\(^7\)

The same impact has been seen in the Internet and politics. In an ideal world, the Internet would be utilized as a vehicle of political participation, a way of holding our elected representatives accountable, a channel for brainstorming ways to engage with our government, or a medium for us to exercise our freedom of expression. However, the Internet is not living up to Tocqueville’s visions of civil associations or public forums. How often do we see instances of civil associations, of people using the Internet to fulfill their special interest or self-interest, and ultimately resulting in the pursuit of the public good? How often do we see the Internet used as a public forum to discuss public affairs and public goods?

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If television was depoliticized when it was brought into the living room, then one could make the claim that the Internet was depoliticized once it was brought into the bedroom. In doing this, the Internet has privatized information; rather than receiving information from a political resource or public forum, you can get it directly in your bedroom, where you sleep, watch TV and of course, endlessly surf the web. Think about the last time that you used the Internet. There is a good chance that you were in your bedroom, and that it was for a matter of personal, rather than public, concern.

And once again, one of the Internet’s defining assets has become its most glaring weakness; an additional unintended consequence of the easy access that the Internet offers is that users have access to an endless spectrum of areas. Internet users can choose to expose themselves to information on sports, pop culture, music, technology – the list is seemingly without end. More choice definitely presents advantages for citizens seeking an endless supply of information, but it does not promote political participation, nor does it advance the overall political socialization of the citizenry.

Just like television, the expansion of the Internet “offering diverse contents has allowed viewers to escape from political content into a vast range of diversionary offerings.”77 The Internet, at its core, amounts to a boundless series of distractions and diversions that ultimately lead nowhere. Individuals have the ability to choose which paths to take, with choice being the operative function. But what does more choice mean for democracy? More choice means that Americans are focusing on other areas of their lives, and participating in their democracy has unsurprisingly taken a back seat to recreation and leisure:

To the degree that the Internet becomes a social and occupational medium—via extensive use of email—or a shopping and entertainment medium, it will serve to diminish involvement with civic matters. With diverse worlds at their fingertips, why should ordinary citizens employ the Internet to enrich their civic lives?\footnote{Jennings, M.K., & Zeitner, V. (2003). Internet use and civic engagement, a longitudinal analysis. p. 312.}

The point that Jennings and Zeitner (2003) are making here is pivotal to our understanding of the impact of the Internet on the psyche of the American citizen. More than anything else, the Internet increases our freedom to choose. I mentioned previously that compared to earlier forms of socialization such as the television and the newspaper, the Internet gives us the opportunity to choose specifically what topic we want to read, when we want to read it, and for how long. While this choice may be beneficial to our aforementioned psychological need to attain more information, it does nothing for our democracy.

In Section III, I mentioned that one of the prime arguments that advocates of Internet democracy make is that the Internet provides its users with more choice, with freer communication. In the case of email, recipients have the ability to choose whether to read messages fully or skip them entirely. The downside of all of this choice is that it is not always a good thing. When people are given the choice between personal and public affairs, between reading about a reality T.V. show or a Supreme Court decision, they are very likely to choose the former. As we have already discussed, people prefer activities that require the lowest commitment of time and attention—certainly reading a recap of the last episode of The Jersey Shore does not require the same level of active attention and comprehension than reading the transcript from a legislator’s speech on the Affordable Care Act does. Nevertheless, the Internet definitely affords citizens the ability to choose what they want to read about and what images and content they want to
look at. However, more often than not, citizens’ choices do not bode well for our democracy.

Democracy means focusing on public affairs – this is the outcome, as mentioned previously, of both public forums and civil associations. However, what the Internet, in essence, is promoting, is the ability of the individual to focus on his or her private affairs. And as Tocqueville feared, if every individual is focusing on his or her private affairs, public affairs are neglected. And “when citizens neglect public affairs, rule by the many can become rule by a few. Politics becomes the domain of a few groups, individuals, or institutions, and this subset of the society may eventually tyrannize an atomized and apathetic citizenry.”79

The Internet has not only depoliticized information, but it has led to people losing motivation for political involvement and losing interest in politics altogether. People are already not highly motivated to be involved politically due to their constant state of passivity. However, the Internet accentuates this trend and exacerbates it. In short, the Internet distracts people from civic engagement and political participation; people lose interest in politics and instead occupy themselves with their private affairs, most of which usually revolve around leisure. This is the reason why: “the Internet is held suspect as potentially deflecting people from civic matters.”80

Argument 3: The Internet leads users to experience information overload.

As I have already established, the Internet’s defining characteristic is that it offers its users exposure to a limitless body of information; one of the major consequences of this is that citizens are provided with more choices and thus, more

distractions from political engagement and public affairs. However, there is another serious repercussion of this property of the Internet – information overload. “While the Internet offers an unprecedented opportunity for people to access useful information and engage in civic activities, clear evidence shows that the new media environment is blighted by problems of information overload.”

Information overload, according to psychologist Lucy Jo Palladino, occurs when a person is exposed to more information than the brain can process at one time. “The term was coined in 1970 by Alvin Toffler in his book, Future Shock, and could be applied to just about any experience; however, as more and more people started using the Web, ‘information overload’ became a popular phrase to describe how we felt about going online.”

For a model of information overload, we can look at the distinction between taking a walk through a quiet park and standing on the corner of Times Square in New York City:

Taking a walk exposes us to a slew of complex data, but… our brains are able to process this information, and our nervous system gets soothed. Contrast that with standing on the corner of Times Square… our brain struggles to organize all the sensory data barreling its way, and our nervous system becomes overstimulated.

But isn’t there a difference between innocently inputting an item into a search engine and visiting the single most visited tourist attraction in the world? Can surfing the Internet really produce the same sensations as experiencing the world’s busiest pedestrian intersections, an area through which a third of a million people pass everyday? In terms of the quantity of information that we consume: yes, it absolutely can and does.

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Right now in America, “from reading emails to managing status updates on mobile devices 24/7 with an all-you-can-eat data plan, we are consuming information like never before.”

Just how much information are we taking in on a daily basis?

According to BBC News:

An average US citizen on an average day consumes 100,500 words, whether that be email, messages on social networks, searching websites or anywhere else digitally… These current data levels are the equivalent of each US citizen consuming 12 hours of information - or media - each day. [Given that on average] we sleep for seven hours a day, in practice that means that three quarters of waking time is spent receiving information, the majority of which is electronic.

Now, although the amount of information we are receiving is increasing, the length of the day is not. So where is this time, specifically the extra twelve hours that BBC News estimates is going toward information consumption each day, coming from?

It is coming out of our waking lives – out of time spent at our day jobs, at the dinner table, with friends or family, before sleeping. We cross the street while browsing the scores from Sunday night’s football game, we check our social media accounts when stuck at a red light, we update our blogs under the dinner table – our lives, our

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relationships, our real-life experiences are all “being interrupted by digital
distractions.”

Democracy is dependent on citizens’ abilities to receive and comprehend
information; this is what differentiates knowledge and education from mere exposure to
information. In education, individuals must engage with the information and reflect on
its meaning, rather than idly viewing it from a distance as the prisoners viewed the
images on the walls of the Cave. However, when Internet users undergo information
overload, they have difficulty processing the information; they find that it blends
together in their eyes and minds, just as the dazzling lights and vibrant colors in Times
Square do as they inundate visitors. The prisoners in the Cave who stare at the images
of shadows of objects on the wall are similarly unable to distinguish between which
images represent which objects due to the phenomenon of information overload.
Because the prisoners are presented with so many quantities of stimuli for a long period
of time, they become unable to discern between them as they mix together to form an
incoherent whole.

What this amounts to is white noise, which Euben identifies in his book, Platonic
Noise as “a random mix of frequencies that renders signals unintelligible.” White
noise is a meaningless, hollow visual field, from which it is nearly impossible to draw
any significant connection or association. It would be incredibly difficult to stare at an
image of white noise and make a link to a real-world object. This is represented by the
image on the next page of a man watching a television screen with white noise on it:

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The concept of white noise, although Plato never alluded to it, can be better understood as the incoherent picture of the wall of the Cave. The coherent picture of the wall of the Cave is 7th Avenue in Times Square: packed with tons of colors, contrasts, shapes and various other stimuli; this is what we view, in terms of our sensory abilities. But what we interpret Times Square, the wall of the Cave, and the Internet as, can be more easily understood as white noise. Because there is so much feeding in, the shadows of images of things start to blend into each other to the point that they become indistinguishable. Only then do we have something that Plato never contemplated: white noise.

Every television owner has experienced this white noise at one point or another, which looks like a snowstorm on the television screen and sounds like some variation of radio static, a waterfall or wind coming through the trees. However, this phenomenon is not limited to television. Internet users, too, view the same white noise as they encounter problems of information overload online. This white noise, it would be fair to presume, would be detrimental to individual learning. Therefore, when we examine the

impact of the wealth of information that the Internet provides, in the end, we find that
the result is not more learning, but less. And just as the prisoners viewing the shadows
of images on the walls of the Cave are not brought any closer to the objects by viewing
them, Internet users are driven farther away from the knowledge that they seek by the
white noise that they view on their computer screens.

Information overload not only prevents learning, but it has its own negative
outcomes:

Cognitive overload can lead to indecisiveness, bad decisions and stress… When
you can’t tolerate the overwhelm any longer, you just go for it (and likely go
with the wrong choice)… When overload is chronic, you live in a state of
unresolved stress and anxiety that you can’t meet ongoing demands to process
more information.91

These serve as additional reasons why information overload is likely to impede
individual learning on the Internet. The effects of information overload, such as stress
and anxiety, are usually unfavorable factors in an environment which is conducive to
learning.

Supporters of Internet democracy do, however, concede that information
overload is a problem. But they believe that there is a solution. Internet democracy
advocates understand that political information, although accessible on the Internet, is
not always easy to comprehend. They affirm that “there is a need for sources of
interpretative clarity.”92 We cannot assume that all people are “informed citizens [who
can serve] as majoritarian managers of public affairs…”93 Especially given the fact that
we recognize how susceptible citizens are to information overload, there is certainly a
need for authoritative sources that can clarify issues for the general public. “With

newspapers and television, the media [had] the responsibility of carrying the water of representative government [and was] charged with the duty of ‘translating the whole public life of mankind so that every adult can arrive at an opinion on every moot topic.’ These authoritative sources are absent from the Internet; people can rely on search engines and wikis to “find, filter and scrutinize the abundant stores of online information that are now available; [however], these are no substitute for the strong, authoritative signals that television traditionally afforded seekers of political knowledge.”

With this in mind, the argument follows that the only way to overcome information overload is to have sources of filtering that can decipher all of the content on the Internet to make it comprehensible for the average American citizen. If we had these sources, supporters of Internet democracy allege, citizens would be able to understand the information being projected right in front of them. The impact that the Internet has on citizens would not be mere exposure to information, but authentic education. And instead of hollow white noise, there would be genuinely meaningful content.

The drawback here is that this system in of itself introduces a host of new problems, the first being that there is no objective source of information on the Internet, just as there is no objective newspaper or media elite. If citizens wish to access analysis of the Supreme Court’s decision in affirmative action cases such as the recent Fisher v. University of Texas case, the information that they will receive will be vastly different coming from a conservative, rather than a liberal news source. Some degree of bias is

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inevitable in all contexts – as Andrew Cline elaborates:

No matter how much we may try to ignore it, human communication always takes place in a context, through a medium, and among individuals and groups who are situated historically, politically, economically, and socially. This state of affairs is neither bad nor good. It simply is. Bias is a small word that identifies the collective influences of the entire context of a message.96

Thus, truly objective authoritative sources do not exist. In the context of Plato’s Cave, the closest thing to an authoritative source is the puppet-master who is engineering the shadows of objects for the prisoners to look at. But this ‘authoritative source’ is simply perpetuating the reality in which the prisoners live; he is not concerned with making the content comprehensible for prisoners, but instead with continuing to serve his own interests, just as political parties or news outlets would do when acting as authoritative sources of Internet content. Therefore, the problems of filtering go beyond the problems faced by the Internet- they show that it is impossible to find authoritative sources in any medium altogether.

Both the puppet-masters in the Cave and the news outlets and political parties in the Internet manipulate the audience by projecting shadows of images for them to look at. At the same time though, they are constantly responding to their audience to gain an understanding of what they should display. This refers to an earlier point I made about film directors who model their movies after past successes. They often duplicate the best features of award-winning films, and at the same time, they set the standards for future movies. In this sense, a filmmaker is a puppet-master, because he both stares at the shadows of images of things on the walls and influences them. Therefore, news outlets, political parties and film directors are all perpetuators of the Cave and prisoners

within it.

Nevertheless, Internet users inevitably succumb to information overload; one potential solution to information overload is filtering. However, filtering introduces new issues, which further exemplifies this inherent flaw in Internet democracy.

**Argument 4: The Internet is flawed in the quality of its sources, which are constituted by layers and layers of opinion.**

I have already shown that the information that Internet users are exposed to is problematic due to its quantity. Besides the fact that it produces information overload, it also leads to Internet users experiencing “uncertainty about what to trust.”97 Because there is so much information out there, Internet users are unsure about what to believe. Here we can draw another connection with Plato’s Cave. The prisoners do not know any other reality besides the shadows; thus, they do not believe the philosopher when he comes back from the Cave.

In any event, the information on the Internet is flawed not only for its quantity, but also for its quality. Nowhere is this better seen than in blogs. A blog is a personal website page on which the author can post his or her opinion, thoughts or reactions on the topic of his or her choice. There are hundreds of millions of discrete blogs in the world, and according to Worldometer, more than 200,000 unique blog posts each day.98 All of these blogs vary in their level of quality, which is based on a spectrum of factors (the research involved in preparing them, the time taken to write them, the education level of the author, etc.).

For political blogs, many of their authors draft ten to fifteen blog posts a day,

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reacting to various events that have occurred throughout the day in politics. However, as they write all of these, they usually do not take the necessary time to reflect on their thoughts or think through what they are posting- they simply post mindless information for other people to consume. And most Americans do consume blogs, usually accepting that most of what they read is valid. Even though the quality of blogs varies a great deal as mentioned above, when an Internet user clicks on each blog, they discount all of the distinctions and account them all as being equal- equally true. In fact, according to Social Media Today, 81 percent of U.S. consumers have stated that they trust advice and information from blogs.\textsuperscript{99} The average American believes what they read in \textit{four out of five blogs}, regardless of the bias of the author (which as was previously mentioned is very much inevitable in any context), the time that the author took to prepare and the research the author did to substantiate his or her opinions. None of this matters to readers who mindlessly consume the information posted in the blog and accept what is often opinion to be fact.

Besides this, blog consumption is also dangerous, because blogs are not subject to the same scrutiny as newspapers or other forms of print media and literature. They do not have twelve sets of eyes to review them before they go out to the public. They are usually one person’s thoughts, but give off the impression that the ideas are shared by the masses. Blogs are rife with assumptions, speculation, stereotypes, and hearsay- all of which are enemies to written text. But most of all, the quality of blogs pale in comparison to other forms of written communication, since most of them are hurriedly prepared and hastily published for the public eye to read.

But besides the fact that the information itself is low quality and not based on

adequate time spent reflecting, but rather swift speculation, the fundamental fact that blogs are rooted in opinion is incredibly troubling. We have already determined that any information that we receive in the world is simply recycled opinion — we are taking in ideas that have already been ingested, processed and expelled by another person. It is the equivalent of every single person in the world reading from the same copy of a novel, and passing it onto one another. It would be safe to say that by the time the novel reached the 100th person, some of the pages might be ripped, the spine of the book might be damaged, and the book would most definitely not be in its original form. The same is true about any content written on the Internet, blogs in particular. Nothing about blogs is novel; nothing you are reading is unique, original thought. It is simply the result of previously ingested opinion that is now reflected in a new form.

Therefore, blogs amount to nothing but instant opinions that are treated as attempts to get at the truth. This is exactly like the shadows of images of things on the walls of the Cave- people view them as facts when really they are mere opinions. Thus, the prisoners staring at images on the walls of the Cave are equivalent to people staring at blogs. The difference between puppet-masters, including poets and politicians, and bloggers are that puppet-masters at least trying to get at the truth, while bloggers know they are expressing opinions and treat them as facts.

Let us contrast the blogger with the filmmaker. The movie director tries to create something to express his understanding of the way that things are, and is influenced by his need to satisfy an audience. On the other hand, bloggers work to offer the reader his take on everything as it happens. Bloggers do not stand back to construct an image; they just throw their opinions out there. In essence, a blogger is an opinion machine. From
Plato’s point of view, movie directors shape opinion by creating images of the right things- what is love, what is friendship, what is virtue, etc. In contrast, bloggers shape opinions by simply issuing more opinions.

Therefore, blogs exemplify the previous point about the wall of the Cave consisting of layers of opinions on opinions. And just like the shadows of images on the wall, and the painting of a sunset, it is impossible to gain true knowledge from a blog. This is because what the author writes in the blog is what he has previously gleaned about the topic, and what he subsequently passes onto his readers. This, not the issue itself, but the first author’s interpretation, is what the subsequent reader learns about the issue. But this may or may not be similar to the original information in its purest form before it was taken in.

A blog about the partisan gridlock in Congress that led to the government shutdown in America in 2013 is essentially one person’s opinion, but it has already been compounded by hundreds of other previous opinions which were themselves the products of opinions. What we have is a sort of domino effect of opinions, where it becomes incredibly difficult to trace an idea back to its source and have it regain its original form. In fact, it becomes indistinguishable from its original form.

Remember from our discussion earlier – people cannot look away from the wall of the Cave because they are chained. And these chains symbolize the fact that we cannot afford to ignore the opinions of others and that we need to look at the wall in order to succeed. For this reason, everyone will continue to expose themselves to the shadows of images on the wall, which are on their own distant replications of the concepts that they embody. But since everyone continues to look at the wall, we only
move farther and farther from these objects. Like the ever-expanding universe, the target of knowledge recedes faster away from us.

With blogs, we have moved light-years away from the topic in its rawest form. We eventually move so far that it becomes impossible to learn anything from blogs or from political resources over the Internet in general. No matter the source, every blog on this topic will contain opinions, since the information that the author received is based on other blogs and sources containing opinions. And every blog with opinions will fall into the same trap in being composed of recycled opinions. The reader will then move farther away from truth in reading that blog.

And just as the shadows of images on the wall are interpreted as the actual thing, blogs are accepted as truth – as was previously mentioned, more than 80 percent of Americans regard what they read in blogs as true. But again, we are moving far away from truth with blogs. We are not experiencing the sunset, but other peoples’ interpretations of sunsets.

A fitting visual aid for this is a rubber band ball. At its core, a rubber band ball is composed of an aluminum foil ball – but over time, different colored rubber bands are added, and so the ball gets bigger. However, it becomes harder and harder to access the core. Now imagine the core is an actual idea, an actual chair, an actual sandwich – anything that you would like. Whenever anyone forms or expresses an opinion on that rubber band core -- that chair or sandwich or idea -- another rubber band is added to the ball. Eventually the ball grows huge, as the opinions circulate, but we move so far away from the core that we can no longer identify it, no matter how hard we try.

The people who write these blogs, facilitate the creation of these rubber band
balls, and engineer the puppet show in the Cave are the image-makers. But as we previously discussed, they too must look at the shadows of images on the wall, just as film directors intending to create the next Academy Award winning film must do to succeed.

Nevertheless, blogs epitomize the distinction between information and knowledge. The Internet, in general, presents information to users, not knowledge. Knowledge, as Plato shows us, requires reflection and engagement; there is very much a difference between being a passive receiver of information and an active shaper of knowledge. A passive receiver of information is likely to skim a low quality blog, and accept what he or she is reading as fact. A passive receiver of information is likely to seek as much information as possible in an attempt to satisfy his psychological need to gain control over his or her life. A passive receiver of information is likely to experience stimulus overload due to the quantity of information he or she is exposed to on the Internet. On the other hand, an active shaper of knowledge would resist the need for tons of information. An active shaper of knowledge would prioritize the quality of information over the quantity. And an active shaper of knowledge would free himself from the bondage of the need for information and turn away from the wall…. and the computer screen.

**Argument 5: The Internet produces a social disconnect between its users, which is harmful for our democracy.**

In addition to inducing stimulus overload and leading to the depoliticization of information, the Internet’s single greatest defect is that it produces to a social disconnect between its users, which is detrimental to the social capital necessitated by a democracy.
Going back to Tocqueville’s ideology, the major obstacle in any democracy is overcoming citizen passivity. The value in both public forums and civil associations is that they result in citizens coming out of their homes—either due to self-interest or their concern for public affairs—and the end result is that they develop a genuine interest in engaging with their government. The necessary link in this chain is that citizens need a reason to get out of their house, specifically, a connection to others.

This concept is known as social capital, which is defined by Robert Putnam (1995) as features of social life—networks, norms and groups—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives. The theory of social capital presumes that the more we connect with people, the more we trust them and vice versa. However, Putnam (1995) asserts that America’s social capital has diminished over the last few decades.

What has accounted for this falling social capital? After going through all possible explanations for the erosion of social capital, Putnam (1995) dismisses them all and arrives at one root cause: television. Putnam (1995) contends that each hour spent watching television is associated with less social trust and less group membership. TV also is a major contributor to the displacement of citizens’ time, since most Americans spend 40 percent of their free time watching TV. In addition, television viewership encourages viewers to adopt cynical attitudes towards government.

Of course, TV is not the only culprit. Holistically, our society and culture certainly share some blame for the feelings of disconnect that we feel for one another. “In many western societies, and especially in the United States, there is a concern that

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citizens are becoming disconnected from each other. We no longer join groups, we don’t socialize with each other, and, above all, we don’t trust each other as much as we did in the past."¹⁰² Social capital is maintained by clubs and community service organizations which meet regularly for whatever reason. However, “since the 1960s, Americans began to withdraw from participation in all sorts of civic groups— from the traditional service organizations such as the Rotary Clubs, Kiwanis, and the League of Women Voters as well as bowling leagues and card-playing clubs. They socialized less with friends and neighbors and we voted less often."¹⁰³ Therefore, there is a clear link between how much we participate in groups and networks and how much we engage with our government.

Another inevitable impact of our declining interest in groups and networks is that we have become less trusting of one another. One reason that Tocqueville urged us to form civil associations and public forums is to reduce our excessive individualism, which, as he emphasized, is the major threat to our democracy. But how could excessive individualism and declining social capital lead someone to be mistrusting of others? If your primary concern is your own personal wellbeing, you are likely to be pursuing your own interests and seeking whatever resources are necessary to satisfy them. Since there are only a finite amount of resources (money, food, goods, personal connections, etc.), you will inevitably be competing with others for these resources – this competition breeds mistrust and skepticism. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the result of diminishing social capital was that:

We became less trusting of one another. In 1960, 58 percent of Americans believed that ‘most people can be trusted’ (as opposed to saying that ‘you can’t

be too careful in dealing with people”). By the 1990s barely more than a third of Americans trusted each other, according to national surveys such as the General Social Survey and the American National Election Study.104

Besides losing our trust in one another, Putnam (1995) contends that we have lost our sense of community as well: “We don’t mix with each other as much as we used to and we don’t trust each other. We have become more balkanized, our public life has become more contentious, and our national institutions (especially the Congress), struggle to compromise on even the most basic public policy questions.”105 Now, not all of this can be attributed to a single culprit such as television – a lot of it can be explained by a general transformation of 21st century culture, modern economic changes, industrialization, and the expansion of the nuclear family. However, to the extent that one culprit is responsible, Putnam (1995) affirms that “the principal villain in the decline of social capital is technology, especially television, but perhaps also the Internet.”106

In Section III, I explained that one of the major claims that proponents of Internet democracy make is that the Internet enables us to meet new people and thus is beneficial for social communication. However, the opposite is very much true. For many of the same reasons previously mentioned with television, the Internet hinders social interaction, civil association and public forums. Firstly, the Internet obstructs social communication insofar as it displaces our time. According to recent reports: “Americans spend at least eight hours a day staring at a screen… which is more time than we spend doing anything else, including sleeping.”107 Losing all of this time indefinitely reduces the opportunities that citizens have to explore involvement in their

communities, participate in organizations or network with others. These limitations are in place at a young age too. Teenagers today not only spend several hours of screen time on the Internet during the average school day, but also come straight home from school to go on the computer rather than experimenting with after-school extracurricular activities. Because of patterns such as this, individuals growing up in today’s world struggle to maintain even any consistent levels of social capital.

But does the Internet itself serve to increase social capital? Are Internet forums adequate substitutes to real life forums? And to apply the title of Putnam’s book to our discussion, is it still considered “Bowling Alone” if it’s online (virtual bowling)?

First of all, there is “serious academic research supporting the view of the Internet as a haven for social isolates.” The people who are likely to use the Internet on a very regular basis are those who were not very extroverted to begin with. In addition, many individuals report that the Internet has had a negative impact on their social lives. It is not uncommon for “Internet users [to] report that they have cut back on their social ties. Net use leads people away from social contacts and toward staring at their monitors in not-so-splendid isolation.” There is also research that suggests that “the Internet may be a stressor that depresses and alienates people from interaction.”

One study in particular found that “as Internet use increases, social contact offline decreases, and depression and loneliness increase. Although the Internet enhanced weak online ties, it simultaneously decreased stronger offline interactions.” As one might imagine, this virtual immersion not only ruined their social life but had negative impacts.

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on their emotional health as well, as Internet users tended to become “more depressed,
lead more stressful lives, and have fewer friends—even though they may start out as well
off psychologically as the rest of us.”\textsuperscript{112}

In addition, the Internet takes away time that could be spent on other activities. There are only so many hours in a day, and the Internet “competes for time with other
activities in an inelastic 24-hour day.”\textsuperscript{113} Therefore, the Internet directly and indirectly
tends to discourage individuals away from social contact. However, for the minority of
people who do form groups over the Internet, they tend to isolate themselves within
groups that share their own views. In doing so, they are sheltered from any information
that could challenge their ideologies. According to Sunstein (2001), this phenomenon is
called cyberbalkanization.\textsuperscript{114} Cyberbalkanization is incompatible with one of the core
values of democracy: freedom of expression. The rationale behind this principle is that
the highest degree of truth can only be achieved through an unrestrained ‘marketplace of
ideas.’\textsuperscript{115} Only through hearing the opposite perspective of a contentious issue and being
able to dismiss it can someone be certain that his or her position is correct. But the
Internet makes this kind of dialogue impossible. Instead, what the Internet does is
encourage people to form groups with others who share their beliefs and values and
whom they will never quarrel with. The Internet, therefore, restrains the democratic
marketplace of ideas.

Furthermore, the Internet also keeps people from face-to-face interactions:

The Internet may be diverting people from “true” community because online
interactions are inherently inferior to face-to-face and even phone interactions.

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Online ties maybe less able than offline ties to foster complex friendship, provide intangible resources such as emotional support, and provide tangible material aid.\textsuperscript{116}

High Internet use is also linked to “less offline interpersonal contact, organizational and political participation, and commitment to community.”\textsuperscript{117}

From all of this, it is clear that the Internet does not actually bring people together- it does not combat individualism or make people focus less on their private affairs. Essentially, what the Internet is doing is exposing large groups of people to the same information, and thus, simply expanding the number of people with whom we share a passive experience. Going back to an earlier point made about information compared with knowledge, knowledge and learning require reflection, which is incompatible with the instant gratification nature of the Internet, while information simply encompasses all of the visual stimuli that we are inundated with when we turn on our computer monitors. If two people are simultaneously taking in information over the Internet, there is no connection between them, direct or indirect. They share nothing, except possibly awareness of fact that they are taking in the same information at the same time.

An appropriate analogy that can be made here is when you attend a movie theater with a friend. You are seated next to one another, in close physical proximity, for two hours. But although you are near to one another physically, and you both are processing identical visual and audial stimuli over that two hour time span, there is absolutely no connection between the two of you during the course of the movie. Sure, you may share a few laughs and maybe a brief glance at one another during an awkward moment in the


film, but you are both taking in the information on your own. If there is any sort of reflection, it is either an internal, personal experience during the movie, or a discussion had between you two after the movie over coffee when you compare the film to the last one that you saw together. But essentially, watching a movie in theaters with a friend amounts to a subjective personal experience that you are both taking part in separately. It is not the same as playing a board game with friends or having an enlightened debate. In these instances, you are an active shaper, rather than a passive receiver, of information. There is no social disconnect, and on the contrary, you are directly interacting with your friends through a shared, joint experience that affects the two of you in similar and different ways.

With the Internet, individuals who are searching the web or looking at the same content have no link, no common bond. They are no more connected than the prisoners in Plato’s Cave who happen to be exposed to the same images of shadows of objects of things. The prisoners, in staring at the images on the walls, lose their identities as they become immersed in a new reality. They forget who they are, where they are physically, and who they are sitting with. Their reality becomes the wall. They cannot connect with the other prisoners because they are not even physically there- their minds are on a different plane of reality altogether.

Now let us address a question possessed earlier in the paper of whether the Internet could function as an alternative means of association – or whether virtual space was an acceptable alternative to physical space. Based on what we have established already, virtual space, more often than not, serves to set in motion a social disconnect that makes genuine connection impossible. For a civil association or a public forum to
be successful, both parties need to be communicating effectively. It is not clear that that kind of communication is possible on the Internet. Still, we can speak in more concrete terms about the Internet’s failure to serve as a valid alternative to face-to-face interaction for the purposes of civil association.

We have already established the general lack of trust that people experience over the Internet as it deflates social capital and leads individuals to have feelings of isolation. Besides this, all of the “electronic conversations, bulletin boards, chat rooms and virtual conferences are not only a poor match for traditional face to face interactions but … may also constitute breeding grounds for uncivil intercourse.”118 As Uslaner (2003) remarks:

When you enter an Internet chat room, you can hide your identity, “flame” other people, and “troll” first time visitors to a web site. The Net can be a dangerous place, where “charities” solicit funds for nonexistent causes, scoundrels feign love for lonely hearts, and unscrupulous hackers uncover your credit card numbers. The newsmagazine U.S. News and World Report published a special investigative report suggesting that “the amount of bad stuff out there is truly staggering”—adoption scams, stalking complaints, rigged auctions, and even “the first Internet serial killer… This is the bad Net.”119

Of course all methods of communication and association carry risk of the breakdown of civility. But the fact that this is already becoming fairly common on the Internet, which is still a very new medium, is not only troubling, but demonstrates its risk as an effective medium of communication for civil associations.

Additionally, there is absolutely no connection between the simple exposure to political information and patterns of political engagement. One would expect that in government, political information would lead to learning and a desire to participate.

In fact, this is the very argument that advocates of Internet democracy make - that it will generate increased levels of political participation. However, studies in the field have shown “no connection between information and political engagement, as measured by knowledge about politics or voting. Our more well-educated, media-soaked public simply has not exhibited any significant increase in knowledge about public affairs or any increase in electoral participation over the public of the 1950s.”

This finding demonstrates that the quantity of information is not what matters at all; it is the quality of it. In other words, “it is not simply the availability of information that structures [political] engagement; it is human interest and capacity to understand many complex issues… people’s participation in politics depends upon [these factors].” Again, this goes back to Plato’s distinction between information and knowledge: knowledge requires reflection and engagement, while information requires simple sensory processing. The fact that information exposure over the Internet has absolutely no connection to civic engagement shows that the way that we absorb information on the Internet fails to meet the standard for true learning.

For these reasons, the Internet cannot make you politically engaged; it merely provides the information, but it is up to the user to make use of it. In other words: “the Internet clearly changes capacity and information availability; but it is not yet clear that it will also change motivation and interest, let alone cognitive capacity.” Furthermore, not only does the Internet usually have no net influence on civic engagement, sometimes it can have a negative impact. “A disorientating sense of being technologically connected but politically disconnected can lead individuals to experience frustrations

with political inefficacy and ultimately leads to civic disengagement.”\textsuperscript{123}

The Internet is "viewed warily due to its potential for depersonalizing relationships and depressing the stock of social capital,” and due to the fact that supporters of Internet democracy vastly overestimate the impact that Internet information can have on civic engagement.\textsuperscript{124} For this reason, traditional methods of associations, which have already been proven to be effective at raising civic engagement are preferable to ‘virtual associations.’

With this in mind, we can revisit education in the context of the Cave and education in the context of the Internet. In neither case is education staring at the shadows on the wall or the computer. Real education requires you to turn away from what is being put up right in front of you. After all, how can you be a discerning judge of information until you take time to process it and think it through? If you cannot do that, all you receive is information being thrown at you- mindless information posted in blogs, meaningless visual stimuli and ultimately: white noise.

VI. What About Its Merits? Responding to Challenges from Proponents of Internet Democracy

Counter-Argument 1: The Internet and Freedom of Expression

Let us now revisit some of the strengths of Internet democracy, which I detailed earlier in this paper. Proponents of Internet democracy often insist that the Internet’s greatest virtue lies in its ability to make communication easier for its users. As I mentioned previously, the Internet facilitates many-to-many, rather than one-to-one communication. Many-to-many communication is preferable to one-to-one communication in that it enables an individual to reach more people with his or her message. After all, what would be more effective: having one individual telephone sixteen others separately to remind them about a surprise party that he or she is planning, or having one person email all sixteen simultaneously?

Because of this, advocates of Internet democracy would refer to freedom of expression, which is one of the three core pillars of democracy that I mentioned earlier. The key to freedom of expression is equalizing access; the Internet promises to make the freedom of one to express himself or herself equal for everyone. Assuming that the Internet achieves this purpose and provides its users with a low-cost means of expression, it would certainly make sense to surmise that the Internet is good for democracy. However, while democracy does involve freedom of expression, it is not simply the expression of any ideas that democracy necessitates. Democracy is predominantly concerned with expression that drives citizens away from passivity and towards political participation. This is the form of expression that moves citizens out of the Cave, away from the shadows of images of things on the wall and towards truth. Freedom of expression is not an end in itself, but rather, a means to the greater end of
compelling individuals to adopt a role in their democracy. In the context of education, the reason why we must leave the Cave and the reason why we must turn away from the computer screen is to engage in critical self-examination, which will lead us to truth. I will expand upon the role of ‘truth’ in democracy in the subsequent section.

However, what we are seeing with the Internet is not someone’s independent thought or feeling in a vacuum, but an opinion that has been shaped by hundreds of opinions before it: in essence, an opinion in an echo chamber. The Internet, therefore, is not conducive to the formation of novel ideas, but instead the duplication of concepts already in existence. Just as a movie director generates the premise behind his newest film based on the shadows of images of things on the wall, Internet writers look at others’ work to produce their own.

Of course that is not the only issue with content found on the Internet. Internet creations such as political blogs are generally not based on any deep reflection, notwithstanding, of course, the literal reflection of the computer screen through which the posts are uploaded. For the most part, since the Internet is so easy to access and it requires such a low burden for people to share their thoughts and ideas, users have the tendency to type anything and everything that comes to mind and click SUBMIT.

In essence, what bloggers are doing is structuring opinions and portraying them as facts, which subsequently is how Internet users perceive them. As I previously mentioned, what these blogs amount to is nothing more than layers and layers of opinions. Internet users do not learn about political issues at their core, but instead they take in meaningless images on the screen in front of them. This is hardly different from the prisoners in the Cave who do not see objects themselves, but instead the shadows of
images of objects that are deliberately manipulated by puppet-masters. The issue here is that when puppet-masters construct an image in such a way that it reflects their own opinions, it leaves no room for interpretation on the part of the viewer. And when writers compose blogs that are rife with their own opinions, users have no choice but to accept them, without undertaking any independent reflection of their own.

Why exactly do Internet users have no choice but to accept the information presented in blogs? Clearly if individuals disagree with information being presented in a blog, they can simply close the browser and explore a different website. In the literal sense, they may have a choice. However, when someone is reading a blog post, he or she views the topic in precisely the light that the blogger, or puppet-master, intends them to. There is no room for interpretation or evaluation, and for this reason, the individual loses his or her agency. He or she also loses touch with the existence of something beyond that world.

Now, one might raise the objection: why is this different than listening to the radio, reading a novel or newspaper, or watching a television program? The difference lies in the selectivity of the information which is provided. Writers on the Internet manipulate and shape facts differently than other forms of media. The reader presumes that he or she has freedom in this process, since the Internet offers users the ability to decide how much time to spend reading an email, as opposed to a long article. However, this choice is merely a mirage. In reality, Internet users can certainly choose what they want to look at, but they cannot choose the information that they receive or the perspectives of the authors who bend this information in their writing. They are presented with a painting of a flower in a vase, which was painted in a certain light, one
that is likely to evoke a specific response. While they can certainly choose how long they would like to look at that painting, their resulting emotional and cognitive responses have already been pre-determined for them by the artists (or the puppet-masters in the context of the Cave).

In theory, users have a choice— they can go to another site and expose themselves to new information—but in practice, many people become so engrossed in the images of things -- the layers of opinions, the information overload, the white noise that blinds the viewer’s eyes like the blaring lights of Times Square — that they cannot see beyond the screen that is right in front of them. In addition to this, they become wrapped up in a vicious information-seeking cycle that they cannot remove themselves from. In this sense, many people sacrifice their autonomy when viewing political blogs.

For a concrete example of the Internet’s tendency to inhibit quality of expression, let us return to the TRP-NE case study. Earlier in this paper, I referenced the TPR-NE (or Telecommunications Policy Roundtable-Northeast) in order to demonstrate a situation where citizens used the Internet as a mechanism to mobilize citizens and effectuate policy change. However, the TPR-NE can also be used to demonstrate the flaws of the Internet as a communicative medium. Participants in the TPR-NE experienced difficulties with text-based communication:

The use of e-mail greatly inhibited the discussion of ambiguous concepts. Unambiguous concepts, such as meeting times, phone numbers, or agendas, could be easily expressed in written form. However, if participants wanted to discuss the subtleties of language in proposed legislation (e.g., what is the meaning of “equity” in the context of a national information infrastructure), then text-based communication required both skillful expression and lengthy communications.125 This statement exemplifies one of the most pressing reasons for the Internet’s

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failure as a communicative medium and as a mechanism for democracy. The Internet is undoubtedly effective for the exchange of unambiguous information, such as: *What times are you available to meet this week?* or *Who do I contact about this issue?* But to debate controversial provisions of public policies or to simply bounce ideas off of one other, it is necessary to use alternative methods of communication to the Internet. As Klein (1999) notes, while the TPR-NE utilized email communication and listservs, the most effective “creative brainstorming was rarely achieved on the Internet. Face-to-face communication worked far better for such discussions, since it allowed for the use of gestures, intonation of the voice, and rapid interactivity among participants.”

Emoticons are not an adequate placeholder for facial expressions, and italicization is not a sufficient substitute for vocal inflection. The Internet just cannot replicate factors such as body language, head positions, posture, and other physical indicators of one’s thoughts and feelings.

On this note, a wealth of research indicates that 70 percent of communication occurs without a person having to say a single word. Body language is a powerful tool that people rely upon in order to judge one another’s internal thoughts and feelings, even if they are not spoken. What online communication ultimately does is deprive individuals from accessing this 70 percent of communicative information. You cannot reproduce someone’s tone or voice in an email to a listserv, nor can you judge a person’s temperament from an electronic text message. This is why innocuous phrases such as: “you have no idea” can be completely misinterpreted depending on the vantage point of the recipient. Sometimes Internet users detect sarcasm or bitterness in a response when

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it is not there, or exaggerate an individual’s use of bold font in a sentence. Punctuation marks are misinterpreted, and an individual’s use of caps lock is misunderstood as having been written in anger, when it was instead intended to show excitement.

The reality is that there is only so much information, which can be communicated in virtual space with our 26-letter alphabet and assorted punctuation marks. Unfortunately, a great deal of information is lost in translation over the Internet. Again, this is a testament to the importance of body language in communication. And when someone only receives 30 percent of a message, you can certainly expect that there will be ambiguity and misunderstandings. This was seen in the TPR-NE experience, where “text-based communication did impose restrictions on messages’ content.”

People may argue that by connecting more people to one another, the Internet encourages them to pursue in-person relationships and activities. However, many of the correlational studies in the field have indicated that the Internet is more likely to be a detractor from, rather than a contributor to, real world social interaction.

If the Internet only displays low-quality information not based on reflection, then how can we achieve actual learning? Plato would argue that taking control of your life means turning your back on the information in front of you. Therefore, in order to actually evaluate the value of the Internet, we need to stop looking at it. The key to gaining knowledge is- ironically- resisting the very information that is right at our disposal.

The goal is for us to be able to think freely as individuals. Blogs and other Internet media inhibit our ability to think independently. Since we have ready access to

everyone’s opinions on every topic, we no longer have to think for ourselves. Again, Internet users lose agency because the opinions are literally already created for them and they cannot engage in critical self-reflection. They therefore lose touch with there being something beyond that world. We can simply type in a URL or click on one of the millions of webpages on Google and adopt an opinion that has already been prepared for us. It is in this sense that the Internet is an impediment to creativity.

To add to this, many Internet browsers now have the capacity to track the sites that users have recently viewed and subsequently suggest web pages based on previously-viewed sites and searches. This guides users to additional websites and further minimizes their freedom of choice. Users are not proactive in seeking information on the Internet, but reactive- not active, but passive observers in the Internet ecosystem.

In general, the Internet encourages users to assume the opinions of others- it encourages users to stare at the shadows of images on the wall of the Cave. It encourages users not to think for themselves. Only by turning away from it can we achieve reflection and leave the Cave.

**Counter-Argument 2: The Unfamiliar Barriers to the Internet**

In addition to their arguments praising the Internet’s relationship with freedom of expression, proponents of Internet democracy would reference the low cost of Internet communication in their contention. They may concede that real-life association is indeed preferable to the Internet. However, they would affirm that the Internet is more convenient and freer from the barriers of time and cost than real life associations; thus, the Internet is a more practical and convenient method of communication.
However, it is important to realize that there are significant obstacles to Internet usage, as well:

The Internet introduces some new barriers of its own. The required investment in computer and communication hardware, monthly service fees, and computer skills can be significant. Effective expression in a text-based medium requires a high level of education. These barriers make it likely that, at least in the near future, the Internet’s democratic potential will be exploited by relatively elite groups of citizens with the money, access to technology, skills, and general education to use them. This is evident in the case of telecommunications reform described earlier, in which the citizens who effectively organized online were also those with the skills and resources to use the Internet. ¹³⁰

Basically, since not everyone has access to the Internet, and not everyone has the same level of computer proficiency, the Internet may not be the great equalizer that proponents of Internet democracy allege it to be. This is particularly valid when we examine the various age demographics; individuals between the ages of 13 and 21 are far more likely to be proficient Internet users than individuals in their 50s and 60s who have not yet adapted to computers or smartphones.

Besides this, it is very possible that in the future, the Internet could become limited to only those who have the physical and intellectual resources to use it. As Gurevitch et al. (1999) notes:

Moreover, while citizens have access to more information and communication resources that ever before, these are not distributed equally. Access differentials reflect patterns of social inequality, with poorer, less educated people least likely to have access to or skills in using the Internet. The growing importance of the online environment could serve to strengthen the voices of the privileged, leaving citizens with limited resources, skills or confidence reliant upon a narrowing range of mass-media sources providing shallow political information. ¹³¹

According to the US Census Bureau, 76 percent of households reported having a

computer as of 2011.132 This is undoubtedly the majority of homes in America; however, for the 24 percent of households who do not have the technology to access the Internet in their homes, their voices are effectively silenced in this form of political communication. In essence, the majority in society certainly benefits from this system, since most people have Internet access in their homes. But we cannot ignore that there are clear barriers to Internet access for many groups. And for these individuals, their opinions are effectively suppressed.

Additionally, reports show that only 57 percent of African American and 58 percent of Hispanic households had computers in their households in 2011, which may be further troubling if there is a racial division in access to these resources.133 According to the Department of Commerce, certain demographic groups tend to lag behind others in home Internet use. “People with low incomes, disabilities, seniors, minorities, the less-educated, non-family households, and the non-employed” are much less likely to have Internet in their households than other groups.134 Therefore, what the Internet really does is exaggerate preexisting social inequalities. Those who already have the resources to participate in their democracy continue to be at an advantage, while those who do not are shut out of the system.

Another major barrier, besides the availability of resources, is technological literacy. Millions of adults who have access to the Internet in their household self-identify as being technologically illiterate.135 This means that they have difficulty browsing the web, and in general completing basic tasks on a computer. Therefore, we

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need to consider that in addition to the nearly one quarter of Americans who do not have home access to the Internet, there is another subsection of the population who do not have the skills necessary to use the Internet.

In theory, the Internet achieves many-to-many communication and removes barriers to communication. In practice, though, what the Internet does is enlarge the existing gap between social classes. Those who can access the Internet are those whose voices are already heard, in politics and in other realms within society. The people who cannot afford to access the Internet are those whose voices are not heard and whose voices continue to be ignored.

What the Internet ultimately does is “perpetuate and reinforce existing inequalities in civic engagement. Those individuals with greater pre-existing resources and skills will simply adopt the Internet as another tool... the Internet could exaggerate existing inequalities in civic engagement, due in part to the ‘digital divide’ associated with differential access to the Internet.” For this reason, the Internet does not remove preexisting barriers to communication, but rather imposes new ones.

**Counter-Argument 3: The Feasibility of Filtering**

Finally, advocates of Internet democracy would be likely to concede that the Internet is likely to induce information overload for its users. However, they would contend that people do have the ability to filter out only the information that they need. This concept of filtering, according to Cass Sunstein (2001), is “the most striking power provided by emerging technologies.” According to Sunstein (2001):

Filtering is inevitable, a fact of life. It is as old as humanity itself. No one can

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see, hear, or read everything. In the course of any hour, let alone any day, every one of us engages in massive filtering, simply to make life manageable and coherent. With respect to the world of communications, moreover, a free society gives people a great deal of power to filter out unwanted materials. Only tyrannies force people to read or to watch. In free nations, those who read newspapers do not read the same newspaper; some people do not read any newspaper at all. Every day, people make choices among magazines based on their tastes and their point of view.

But while filtering is offered as a definitive solution to information overload, it introduces problems of its own. Reliance on media elites to interpret information for us makes us dependent on puppet-masters again. We have another instance of an echo chamber full of opinions that blurs our vision and guides our judgment. Whether the information is filtered for us or not, we are still dependent on puppet-masters who control just how we interpret this information. Without filtering, we interpret the information based on how it is structured for us to perceive it. All filtering does is ensure that the biases and opinions of the puppet-masters are directly manifested in the viewers or readers.

Furthermore, as I illustrated earlier, the major obstacle to filtering as a solution to the challenge of information overload is that there is no truly objective source of information on the Internet. There are no media elites who can decipher the content for American citizens in a non-biased fashion. As I mentioned previously, bias is inevitable in every context. For this reason, filtering cannot be a solution to information overload.

Still, even if filtering were a perfect solution to information overload, it would still not be able to address all of the issues that it produces. Information overload is a proven phenomenon that prevents learning. “The average person today consumes almost three times as much information as what the typical person consumed in 1960, according

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to research at the University of California, San Diego…and The New York Times reports that the average computer user checks 40 websites a day and can switch programs 36 times an hour.\textsuperscript{139} Our lives are permeated by an overabundance of information coming from all directions. As Richtel (2010) remarks, “at one time a screen meant maybe something in your living room. But now it's something in your pocket so it goes everywhere — it can be behind the wheel, it can be at the dinner table, it can be in the bathroom. We see it everywhere today.”\textsuperscript{140}

The issue with the omnipresence of the computer screen is that the information overload that we used to experience while sitting in front of our computer screens now assaults us everywhere. “Computerization and the Internet…blurs the home-work boundary. People bring work home and attend to it rather than to their families, friends, and other activities.”\textsuperscript{141} Waiting on line at the supermarket; sitting at a red light; during our lunch break at work; as soon as we wake up every morning and right before we fall asleep every night: there is literally no end to the constant stream of data in our lives.

VII. Diverging from Plato: Illuminating a Solution to the Problem of Passivity in a Democracy

Now allow me to try to bridge the gap between Plato’s solution to the problem of passivity and my own. I have made it clear throughout this paper that the Internet is not the solution for Americans to escape their inner state of passivity and be active democratic citizens. But then what is the solution? Additionally, from the Platonic perspective, individuals leave the Cave to seek truth. But what is the relationship, if there is one, between truth-seeking and democracy?

I will answer these two questions, but I will address the latter before I address the former. Throughout this paper, I have argued that the Internet is not concerned with depicting the truth for citizens. Instead, the Internet (through bloggers, for example) perpetuates a series of opinions, which are deliberately engineered to elicit a certain type of perception or reaction. This is analogous to puppet-masters who create shadows of images of objects on the walls of the Cave for the prisoners to look at and the directors to who create movies that shape the opinion of the viewer. In all of these cases, the viewer or reader moves farther from the truth in engaging in these activities.

However, the goal of this paper was not to assess whether the Internet was conducive to the pursuit of truth, although my conclusion is that the Internet is an unfavorable mechanism for those who seek truth nonetheless. On the other hand, I am concerned with whether the Internet is good for democracy. And so again, I ask: what is the relationship between truth-seeking and democracy?

I am not affirming here that all democrats must be truth seekers. I am not even affirming that in order to be a democrat, you must pursue the truth. But the contention that I am making, and that I have been making throughout this paper, is that democracy
is about moving away from passivity for purposes of bolstering civic engagement. To break with passivity requires not more information (as I have shown) but a willingness to actually seek the answers for yourself. Because the Internet deprives individuals of the ability to seek the answers themselves and simply projects fully-fledged ideas and opinions onto screens for them to absorb, the Internet does nothing to counter our inner states of passivity. In contrast, the result of Internet exposure is the exacerbation of our passive state. Therefore, the Internet is not conducive to democracy, and cannot be an effective apparatus for political socialization and communication among citizens in our democratic society.

Now that we understand the relationship between truth-seeking and democracy, let us now evaluate whether the three pillars of democracy (freedom of expression, political participation and civil associations) are possible with the Internet. While individuals can, in fact, express themselves over the Internet, freedom of expression is more than just an assembly line of feelings and thoughts – these must be one’s original ideas that are the result of reflection. As I have illustrated in this paper, Internet innovators and citizens sitting in front of their computer screens, much like puppet-masters and prisoners, respectively, cannot actually engage in reflection on the Internet. Therefore, the kind of freedom of expression that a democracy necessitates is not possible on the Internet.

In regards to the second pillar of democracy, political participation, the Internet does not encourage civic engagement. Studies have been conducted on whether there is a correlation between time spent on the Internet and a person’s voting history. Nearly all
of the research in the field shows no relationship between the two variables. This is one of several repercussions of the Internet’s worsening of our state of passivity. If the Internet were to have the impact of driving citizens out of their passive states, we would almost definitely see a clear correlation between Internet use and political participation. Since there is no such relationship between these measures, the notion that the Internet is disadvantageous for our democracy is further supported.

Finally, the Internet does not facilitate the formation of civil associations or public forums, the third element of a democratic society. Civil associations and public forums are the mechanisms through which we can combat citizen apathy. As was mentioned previously, individuals join civil associations due to their common interests, while citizens join public forums out of concern for the public good. But the end result is the same- citizens leave their homes and end up engaging with one another and improving society. Earlier in this paper I posed the question of whether virtual space was an acceptable alternative to physical space, and I would like to again reiterate the reasons why it is not. Social capital is necessary for a democracy; trust is an essential element of social capital, since trust binds people to one another and makes for a strong, tight-knit community. But as was previously established, it is incredibly difficult for a sophisticated level of trust to be fostered over the Internet. For this reason, the Internet is incompatible with civil associations.

At this point, it is evident that the Internet is not well-suited for our American democracy. Now, I will tackle the second question that I posed at the beginning of this section: if it is not through the Internet, then how exactly can we escape our innate state

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of passivity and become active democratic citizens? What is the solution to this state of affairs? We have determined in this paper what the solution is not. The solution is not flooding people with information. It is not exposing citizens to thousands of web pages and Internet blogs. It is not flashing countless shadows of images of things on the walls of the Cave for prisoners to look at. We now know what the solution is not, but this begs the question -- what is it?

For the answer to this question, we must return to our discussion of Tocqueville’s account of individualism and apathy. As Tocqueville contends, individualism is the central cause of our passivity, and only by combatting individualism can we begin to reduce these innate passive attitudes. The way that we can become a democratic citizen, Tocqueville indicates, is by departing from our homes and coming together with other citizens. Through the formation of civil associations and public forums, we can exit this state of passivity.

Most parents of children, and perhaps medical professionals as well, often criticize the Internet for preventing their children from going outside and taking in the sunlight. Ironically, from a political theory lens, as well, that is the single greatest flaw with the Internet: “it keeps people indoors, staring at their screens, and neglecting local interactions at home and in the neighborhood.”144 It prevents individuals from joining bowling leagues (real bowling leagues not virtual ones) and reading groups, community service organizations and religious associations, sewing circles and baking clans, pottery clubs and photography groups, choirs and orchestras, ballroom dance teams and hip hop cliques, labor federations and workers unions; simply put, the Internet keeps people

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from engaging with others and building social capital. And because social capital, civil associations and public forums are such a central part of our democracy, it is for this reason that the Internet ceases to be democratic.

Two final questions arise: (1) How exactly do we turn away from the images on the computer screen? (2) Can anyone do this or does it require a special set of skills? To address the first question, Plato argues that in order to attain real knowledge, you must look away from the shadows of images of things on the wall and engage in critical self-examination. Without this, we cannot actually learn. In the context of the Internet and democracy, in order to truly perform your civic duties as a democratic citizen in engaging with your government, you must pursue other means of involvement above and beyond just inertly serving the web. For both Plato and myself, turning away from the Cave and the computer screen is the key to knowledge and the path to escaping passivity.

In regards to the second question, Plato affirms that only a few gifted individuals are actually able to resist the shadows of images of things on the wall of the Cave – these individuals ultimately exit the Cave and recognize the Form of the Good. These are the philosopher-kings, and as Plato contends, only they are fit to rule in a just society. The point at which my argument diverts from Plato’s is that I argue that everyone has the capacity to turn away from the computer screens, not just a small subset of exceptional individuals. I have faith in everyone’s ability to turn away from the Internet, because I contend that the solution to the problem of democratic passivity is less complicated than guiding individuals in the direction of the Form of the Good. Solving democratic passivity simply means getting people out of the home and into
groups with others. Anyone can join a civil association or a bowling league; there are no special requirements (except maybe some basic hand-eye coordination), and it is not only a small subset of philosophers who are able to do so. That would be like saying only those experienced bowlers who have been practicing for several years are eligible to join a bowling league; this is unworkable, and not the way that our country operates. All the same, once citizens are part of civil associations, they erect social capital, and in the process, they shape our democracy.

This is not to say that the Internet has absolutely no place in a democratic society. The Internet should, in fact, be regarded as one instrument of political socialization and communication. However, it should be a complement to already-existing structures such as civil associations, not the answer of its own accord. As Klein (1999) notes:

The Internet’s greatest contribution is likely to be as a complement to the meeting-hall forum rather than as a replacement. Face-to-face communication is as vital and as beneficial to associations today as it was in Tocqueville’s time, and without some meeting-hall forums it is unlikely that an association could operate effectively. Likewise, newspapers remain an indispensable means of disseminating information and analysis.145

It is important to realize that “no technology by itself can offer a solution to the inherent social problem of citizen participation in democracy.”146 The Internet certainly could be one part of the equation for all of the reasons that proponents of Internet democracy allege. However, it is clearly not the entire solution.

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