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Can Liberty Survive the Digital Age?

As I write this, I am preparing to participate in a Princeton-Fung Global Forum on the topic of the title of this column. It is taking place in cooperation with the Humboldt Institute

in the historically significant city of Berlin. The role of digital technology in society has never been more visible than in the unexpected results of the U.S. 2016 Presidential election and the U.K. vote to exit from the European Union ("Brexit"). Online social media have provided a megaphone for voices that might not have been heard except in limited circles. New terms have been introduced into the vocabulary such as "alternative facts" and "fake news." The Internet is not the only path through which these phenomena have propagated, but online social media have demonstrated a triggering capacity beyond earlier expectations. The so-called "Arab Spring" a few years ago also illustrated the collaborative and even coercive power of digital social media, alarming authoritarian regimes, and triggering Internet shutdowns.

It seems timely to explore this question, especially as efforts continue to bring the 50% of the world that is not yet online into parity with the 50% already there. On the positive side, there are many voices that would never be heard were it not for the amplifying power of the Internet; voices crying out for social justice, economic and educational opportunity. That same amplifying effect, however, gives visibility to deliberate (or ignorant) misinformation, hate speech, incitement to violence, and advocacy of terrorism. Naïve Internauts and those unable or unwilling to think critically about what they see and hear, may well accept as valid, bogus and ill-motivated assertions

aimed at nefarious objectives and insidious undermining of stable society.

Technical means are of limited value in this arena, although they have proven useful against spam (unsolicited email), scams, malware propagation, and resistance to various forms of digital attack. Social norms, education, and tolerance for diverse views may be critical elements of a response to the challenges that the digital age places on liberty.

To make matters more complex, the Internet and the World Wide Web are transnational phenomena. Information flows do not stop for inspection at national boundaries nor is it clear they should but this makes the challenge of coping with misinformation all the harder. One might hope that our societies would value freedom of expression and tolerant critical thinking that evaluates content and rejects or accepts it based on widely held social norms. The problem with that formulation is that history teaches that social norms can be enormously harmful. One has only to look to history for lessons of slavery, the Holocaust, and Apartheid to realize that reliance on social norms may not produce a fair and equitable society. The so-called "bubble effect" found in social networks only exacerbates the echo chamber phenomenon. Confirmation bias is a well-known problem even in scientific circles where respect for data and its potential to disrupt accepted theory is fundamental to progress.

As I write, the Princeton-Fung Forum is about to get underway, so I do not have solutions or conclusion to of-

fer nor am I confident that solutions will emerge from these discussions. What I am certain of, however, is that it is vital to have these discussions. To wrestle with the problems that widespread access to the mechanisms of information production and consumption appear to pose seems an inescapable responsibility for the creators and users of modern digital technology.

Can liberty truly survive the Digital Age? We won't know the answer unless we try to find ways to assure a positive outcome. We must not only have more and better information to combat bad and misleading information, but we must want to discover that information and to take the time and trouble to assess its merits. In the past, we relied on high-quality journalism with its exercise of responsible editorial management. Today this is becoming increasingly difficult with abundant sources of opinion masquerading as journalism. We must learn how to become our own editors in the same sense that we became our own telephone operators with the advent of direct distance dialing.

The technical community has the opportunity to produce tools that can be used by Internauts everywhere to separate quality information from dross, but the application of those tools falls to individual users willing to exercise critical thinking to get at the facts. Will liberty survive the Digital Age? Yes, I think it can, but only if we make it so.

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