

Closing Argument

THE INTERNET'S EFFECT ON OUR SOCIETY

BY ERIC GOLDMAN

It's a simple question with extraordinary stakes: Does the Internet improve or worsen our society?

No one knows the answer for sure, but that hasn't stopped the media and politicians from relentlessly criticizing the Internet. This has contributed to a broad-based "techlash" of skepticism about, and antipathy towards, the Internet and other technologies. Many people are now convinced that the Internet is profoundly harming our society and breaking down social order.

These criticisms often proceed as if human incivility started with the Internet. But, of course, people have been terrible to each other for millennia. Thus, to fairly assess the Internet's effects, we should establish an "offline baseline" of anti-social behavior. In other words, if the Internet never existed, how much anti-social behavior still would occur in our society? This baseline helps us isolate the incremental new anti-social activity attributable to the Internet.

With an offline baseline established, three metaphors could describe the Internet's effects on our society.

Metaphor #1: The Accelerant. The prevailing view is that the Internet makes people worse, i.e., the Internet turbocharges our inclinations towards anti-social actions. Proponents of this metaphor point to Internet attributes like: a lack of accountability due to online anonymity/pseudonymity; the absence of face-to-face interactions that would otherwise encourage civility; the scale and reach of

social media; and social media services' incentives to profit from outrage and engagement. An accelerant example might be cybermobbing, where users—who may know nothing about each other—coordinate vicious attacks on a person online.

Metaphor #2: The Mirror. The "mirror" metaphor suggests that anti-social behavior on the Internet reflects the offline baseline. In this metaphor, the Internet doesn't manufacture new anti-social behavior; it simply makes disquieting aspects of our society more visible. In other words, the Internet is the messenger, not the cause.

The phenomenon of sex trafficking may illustrate the mirror theory. Sex trafficking long predates the Internet. Does the Internet boost sex trafficking or just make it more visible? Congress tried to curb online sex trafficking in 2018, but that law mostly moved commercial sex promotion back offline (and put sex workers at greater physical risk). Worse, law enforcement and victims' advocates had more difficulty rescuing sex trafficking victims and prosecuting sex trafficking criminals. These outcomes suggest that the Internet mirrored, rather than accelerated, sex trafficking. Congress' efforts made the activity less visible, didn't fix any problems, and perhaps made things worse.

Metaphor #3: The Decelerant. There's a third possible metaphor that usually gets ignored: What if the Internet reduces anti-social behavior?

Here's an example of how that might work. Some social media services use "civility prompts." When the services notice a user posting something incivil, the service

will prompt the author to reconsider the message. Some users blast through the civility prompt, and others view getting the prompt as a badge of honor. However, the prompt causes other users to revise their message to improve its civility; and some users improve their overall civility in future messages, too. I imagine civility prompts like a guardian angel sitting on the user's shoulder, urging them to make good choices. Offline conversations lack civility prompts, so online civility prompts could potentially produce better conversations online.

To be clear, the decelerant metaphor doesn't predict zero anti-social outcomes online, any more than we expect zero anti-social outcomes offline. But it does raise the possibility that thoughtful technological developments and deployment might play a role in improving overall social interactions.

Adopting the right metaphor is essential to good Internet policymaking. When regulators incorrectly assume the accelerant metaphor applies, they overregulate—and make problems worse. This is driving regulators to actively shut down segments of the Internet on the assumption they are protecting us. Instead, if they are getting the metaphors wrong, we're losing our online voices—and an opportunity to make us all better.

About the Author: Professor Eric Goldman is Associate Dean for Research, Co-Director of the Datta Center for High Tech Law, and Co-Supervisor of the Privacy Law Certificate, at Santa Clara University School of Law. This essay previews his forthcoming book, "How the Internet Improves Humanity."