Open Minds and Open Learning in the 'Cosmopolitan' Internet

Menti Aperte e Apprendimento Aperto nella Rete Cosmopolita

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ABSTRACT
The promise of technology, in particular of the internet, was that access to information would become demography blind. But for all of the successes the global web of information has demonstrated to us, has it really achieved its potential as a vehicle for overcoming the divide between the 'undereducated' and the 'overqualified,' that is between the generations, or indeed between any of the socially divisions so visible in the analogue world? If we are to ask the straightforward question "Is the internet a cosmopolitan space," that is one promoting tolerance and engagement across boundaries, the answer we are likely to come to is ambiguous, at best. This paper presents both a longitudinal perspective on the internet's potential as a space for intergenerational learning to occur, and some wider potential barriers to this development.

La tecnologia – internet in particolare – prometteva di azzerare lo scarto generazionale nell'accesso alle informazioni. Tuttavia, nonostante il successo globale dimostratoci dalla rete d'informazioni, è possibile sostenere che esso abbia raggiunto il su opotenziale di veicolo per il superamento del divario tra gli individui "sub-formati" e quelli "sovraqualificati" – cioè quello tra generazioni o tra ogni qualsivoglia divisione sociale lampante nel mondo analogico? Dovendo porci la domanda schietta se Internet sia o meno uno spazio cosmopolita, la risposta che forniremmo sarebbe probabilmente (e nel migliore dei casi) ambigua. Questo articolo presenta sia una prospettiva longitudinale sul potenziale della Rete come spazio ove avviene l'apprendimento intergenerazionale, sia alcuni potenziali barriere estensive al suo sviluppo in tal senso.

KEYWORDS
Open Learning, Cosmopolitanism, Technology and Society, intergenerational Solidarity, Social Cohesion
Open Learning, Cosmopolitismo, Tecnologia e società, Solidarietà intergenerazionale, Coesione sociale

Introduction

The promise of technology, in particular of the internet, was that access to and sharing ofinformation would become demographically blind. In the 1990s, the optimist could foresee a world where curiosity could be instantly satisfied, where a global community of the like-minded enthusiasts could be assembled easily, and where the barriers to entry for the temple of knowledge were ever decreasing, even in rural and economically disadvantaged areas.

In some ways, this world has come to be, for the best of our work in the internet age has indeed transcended the boundaries of what we could have achieved before it existed. Immediate requirements for knowledge in crisis situations have been satisfied via social media, as in the now famous example of the 2011 'Arab Spring'. And, over a longer-term view, museums, libraries and archives have found new avenues for reaching out to their public, for supporting the communal curation and interpretation of the artifacts of our cultural capital for a new age with new challenges to our identity. In Ireland, for example, the release of the 1901 and 1911 census data in an easily searchable form has inspired massive public interest, with a broad access profile and described by one writer as "arguable the single most successful public cultural project in the last 25 years." (O'Toole).

But for all of the successes the global web of information has demonstrated to us, has it really achieved its potential as a vehicle for overcoming the divide between the 'undereducated' and the 'overqualified,' that is between the generations, or indeed between any of the socially divisions so visible in the analogue world? And of these successes, to what extent have they been accepted as the learning opportunities they are, driven not by standards and stage-appropriate learning outcomes, but rather by the application of curiosity and its satisfaction to the shaping of a creative mind and well-rounded citizen?

1. Technology, Tolerance and Cosmopolitanism

The first of these two questions is perhaps the easier one to approach, albeit perhaps the less hopeful in its analysis. For if we are to ask the straightforward question "Is the internet a cosmopolitan space," that is one promoting tolerance and engagement across social and cultural boundaries, the answer we are likely to come to is ambiguous, at best. I prefer the use of the word 'cosmopolitan' in this context over other, more generationally focused terms, both for its inclusivity and for its tradition of orientation toward actions, rather than a state of existence. Kwame Anthony Appiah, for example, frames cosmopolitan existence as a responsibility as much as an external condition. For him, cosmopolitanism is "the name not of the solution, but of the challenge" (XXIII), the challenge of negotiating paired stances of "universal concern for others and respect for legitimate difference." Appiah is also useful as a starting point because he does not remain silent of the contentious place of information technology within the realm of this challenge:

> «[…] the worldwide web of information – radio, television, telephones, the Internet – means not only that we can affect lives everywhere but that we can learn about life anywhere, too. Each person you know about and can affect is someone to whom you have responsibilities: to say this is just to affirm the very idea of morality. The challenge, then, is to take minds and

heart formed over the long millennia of living in local troops and equip them with ideas and institutions that will allow us to live together as the global tribe we have become.»

It is probably not with the thought of the others she may be connecting with (and thereby acquiring responsibilities toward) that the average internet user performs the simple technologically-driven tasks that pepper her daily life: a bit of social networking, a bit of information searching, a bit of commerce, etc. With each of these steps, we acquire (or so Appiah would argue), barnacle-like, a set of interconnections that expand the group of those for whom we take responsibility, and whose lives we are asked to value differently. A daunting prospect to be sure, but one which is crucial to the development of the bonds of trust and respect across generations which are the foundation upon which open learning must be established. This is not the only way to view the application of technology in a social context, however, and it is a relatively far distance from the roots of the discourse.

Much of the earliest writing about technology was, understandably, able to gloss over the impact that these tools would have on society as a whole. Nicholas Negroponte's *Being Digital* is a landmark in this respect, butwhat is most striking about that book 15 years after its first appearance is how little it contains about people. The excitement of the technology eclipses the human, with a tacit assumption that the two are somehow separate. Technology is celebrated as stagecraft, and 'oh what a wonderful stage we will have' seems to be Negroponte's primary interest.

Another, perhaps more nuanced example of this early literature of technophiliais David Gelernter's *Mirror Worlds or: the day software puts the universe in a shoebox how will it happen and what will it mean*. Gerlernter's text provides far more than the ebullient enthusiasm that characterizes Negroponte's book. Indeed, *Mirror Worlds* is worthwhile reading 20 years on both for it's plain spoken explanation of how complex software systems are constructed, it's prescience regarding the trajectory of our relationship to information and most especially for its wonderful epilogue, perhaps one of the most elegant presentations of the opposing sides of the 'two cultures debate', pitting science against the arts an humanities, ever written.

Like Negroponte, however, one senses the absence of human society in the substance of Gelernter's book. The image with which he begins his vision of the future, is that of a single solitary individual exploring a rich, but ultimately sterile world of information. In spite of characterizing his mirror worlds as like a small town where you actually 'know' your fellow citizens (23) his presentation of the ways in which we will 'know' each other in this small town is remarkably thin, sterile, perhaps even naïve. Message boards will drive political discourse and coalitions will arise around issues of common concern 'without fundraising, full-time staffers or histrionics.'(25) Even his description of on-line chatting betrays a certain comfort with technology's ability to isolate, rather than connect people: "…you might strike up an electronic conversation. The other guy might be worrying about the same issues as you. Then again, probably not. But, as many computer users already know, electronic conversations are a lot easier to start and stop than real ones."(26) It is therefore difficult not to read more into the following statement than perhaps the author intended: "…the idea of this fundamental inversion in man's relationship to society is hard to grasp but too potent too suppress." (30) For Gelernter, it is the 'whole-sighted' citizen who is required for a

'sane public life,' – but this 'whole sight' is presented as a data retrieval and presentation task, not one which takes into account the contradictions and compromises of social life, the balanced combination of concern and respect inherent in Appiah's 'cosmopolitan challenge.' What should be conceived of as a task of open, social learning is instead cast as a a factual exercise on a wider scale, as if understanding – in the sense of comprehension – could and should be detached from understanding in the sense of compassion.

It is also interesting that it is precisely the 'human all too human' aspects of technological progress that Gelernter seems to miss in his predictions. In particular the whole area of human computer interaction is one he glosses over: "Capturing the structure and present status of an entire company, university, hospital, city or whatever in a single (obviously elliptical, high level) sketch is a hard but solvable research problem (15)." But as anyone who has ever used a poorly designed tool will know, this is and remains one of the greatest challenges for technology.

To say that the technophiles of the early '90s had blind spots would of course not be to suggest that the technophobes were not equally polarized in their views. Jerry Mander's 1991 work *In Absence of the Sacred* takes a distinctly skeptical stance toward technology, and in particular toward the explicit and implicit pro-technology stance he perceives in society. Much of the argument he makes can be found presaged in his 1977 work *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, arguments which seem by and large as applicable to the internet now as they were to television in the 1970s. The first argument is that technology mediates experience, a mediation we can ill afford as Western society has moved ever more into urban, man-made environments. Issues of trust and authority become subject to manipulations when there is no touchstone of experienced reality to judge against. Second, as technology creates a power class of media- or technocrats, it also places human experience in the hands of commercial powers. The third argument is physiological, that the physical impact of engagement with television creates 'confusion and submission'. And lastly, that television is a limited medium, which can only effectively tell certain kinds of stories. It is therefore these kinds of bounded narratives which are privileged in the television era.

Mander's framing of his views has not aged particularly well, maintaining a strong resonance of 1960's counter culture and more than a modicum of technological naivete. But his writing does raise some very salient points for the investigation of how information technologies do or do not support a cosmopolitan consciousness. In particular the questions of trust and authority, so subtly navigated in the analogue world, are of great importance for our understanding of what occurs in cyberspace. Identity is malleable in the internet in a way it is not in the analogue world. Users can be anonymous, physically detached, an in greater control of the interaction, all of which can be very positive for some kinds of personalities and some kinds of interaction. But if we are not sure whom we are interacting with, how do we know whether to trust them? The internet feels 'safe', and in some ways it is – but as numerous incidents of cyberstalking, phishing, identity theft, packet sniffing, privacy concerns among other issues demonstrate, the initial perception of safety must be followed up with the development a more nuanced appreciation of the horizon of risk inherent in on-line interaction. So also with the question of open learning for intergenerational dialogue: while the internet clearly opens the possibility for connection across barriers of age,

Cass Sunstein's Republic.com provides a significant and thoughtful update on

these theories (although it too is over a decade old). While his concerns are primarily drawn from a political, rather than purely social, stance, the conclusions he draws are most certainly of relevance for questions of cosmopolitanism and intergenerational dialogue. Sunstein's two requirements for a well-functioning system of free expression, are a) that people be exposed to materials they would not have chosen in advance and b) that citizens have a range of common experiences. (8-9) Sunstein emphasizes the importance of these factors for a heterogenous nation, and it would not be a great leap to therefore posit these as of central importance for a cosmopolitan stance (indeed, he himself brings in a favorite term of Appiah's, that is of the 'citizen of the world').

What Sunstein calls the 'Daily Me' (a view of world events built on the model of a newspaper, but narrowly customized to individual interests and extant networks) is in some ways inherently cosmopolitan, inherently open, and intrinsically connected with learning. It allows the user to access information and viewpoints across barriers of time, space, culture, age range, language, and religion and allows him to reach out and have an impact on the lives of those far away. It also opens up the potential for grass roots political action, such as Gelernter also envisioned. But unfortunately, it seems that human nature gets in the way. For the internet- driven 'daily me' can, and often does, exclude opinions or subject matter that we either don't want to see or simply don't care to investigate: where our curiosity and tolerance ends, so also does our information flow. The strength of the 'general interest intermediaries' – those television and radio stations, newspapers and magazines that have been so threatened by the rise of new media – is just that they are not the 'Daily Me' but the 'Daily us', making compromises to appeal to a readership broader than one single individual. Rather than creating a stasis in opinions (i.e. that people find others they choose to engage with and then they settle into a community of discourse at that level) Sunstein presents evidence that these homogenous flows of opinion become more polarized over time due to the lack on any sort of corrective dissent in their ranks. The communities that form in the internet don't change or finesse opinions, they confirm them and radicalize them (67 ff). This has been shown to lead not only to the rise of extremism, but also to relatively glaring errors in judgement in group decision making (72). This is not a necessary outcome of on-line discourse – indeed, in diverse online communities, this mode of interaction can actually allow greater equality in discourse to emerge, by masking certain tokens of 'low status' that are all too evident in the analogue world, such as race, gender or age. (78) But this is a potential, and not necessarily the norm.

A second dangerous potential of the internet is that of 'Cybercades.' We have all had experience of information and misinformation 'going viral,' spreading at a furious rate and often being accepted at its face value. The question of who we trust on line and how that trust is conveyed and transferred is of huge import here, for it is our ability to trust which determines our ability to believe, and our ability to believe determines the likelihood that we will lend our own authority to the information by circulating it further again to our trusted circle. Sunstein writes:

> The internet is an obvious breeding ground for cascades, and as a result thousands or even millions of people, consulting sources of a particular kind, will believe something that is quite false. The good news is that the Internet can operate to debunk false rumours as well as start them. But at the same time, the opportunity to spread apparently credible information to so many people induces fear, error, and confusion in a way that threatens many social goals, including democratic ones. As we have seen, this danger takes on a

> particular form in a balkanized speech market, as local cascades lead people in dramatically different directions. When this happens, correctives, even via the internet, may not work, simply because people are not listening to each other.(84)

Needless to say, the speed of the internet and the unfinessed nature of much of the communication norms it has given rise to (think of Twitter's 140 character limit) also tend to support the internet's capacity for 'bunking,' as it were, rather than the 'debunking'. So where is the remedy? Sunsteinaddresses this by pointing out the behavioural gap between individuals acting as *consumers* and as *citizens*. "The choices people make as political participants seem systematically different from those they make as consumers." (114) As consumers, the internet is of unquestionable benefit – our range of choices is greater and consumption of goods is greatly simplified. But consumption does not in and of itself increase well-being or knowledge or real connection between individuals, in particular when the systemic rate of consumption is rising in line with our own. This 'consumption treadmill' is also facilitated by the internet, and while is does make for happy consumers, it doesn't make for happy people. (121).

2. Truly Open Learning

But the dominance within internet-based interactions of our tendency to make choices and establish habits based on our identities as consumers, rather than citizens, is only half of the barrier toovercoming the socialdemarcations that exclude the retired, the disabled, or any marginalized group from the mainstream image of our cultures. For even when individuals can find ways to connect over cyberspace, they may still find themselves defending scarce resources of time to achieve goals which may clearly benefit society (the citizen role), but not necessarily the all-powerful markets for labour and consumption (the consumer role). The educational reformer, John Dewey stated, "The path of least resistance and least trouble is a rut already made. It requires troublesome work to undertake the alternation of old beliefs" (1933; 136), And, unfortunately, the old beliefs strongly privilege the purely rational over the non-rational, the technical over the creative, and work over play – that is, ironically, over those aspects of life which even in professional contexts have come increasingly to the fore in this age of the 'knowledge worker' the 'unmanageable millenial' (Heskitt) and the madcap creativity of the Googleplex. In spite of all of this, we still seem to cling to a paradigm which conflates learning with institutional education, or, perhaps more damning, with training and with professional formation into a known mold. So even as government officials proudly declare their commitments to math and science education and the creation of more engineering graduates, the truth arises that those graduates themselves are unsure of what their training has done for them: one study has shown that only 42% of undergraduate engineering programme graduates actually intend to pursue a career path in engineering (Lichtenstein et al, 227), while another shows that 10 years after entering the work force roughly half of the graduates who did enter the work force within the specialty they trained for – with the exception of architectural engineers – will themselves have left the field (Frehill). Clearly, the model of learning/education as professional formation is deeply flawed, or at least not fit for the purposes of our economy, not to mention our society.

To return to the words of Dewey for another alternative, "The aim of education should be to teach us rather how to think, than what to think — rather to improve our minds, so as to enable us to think for ourselves, than to load the memory with the thoughts of other men" (1916) It is not the skill set itself which education gives us which is of greatest importance: it is the knowledge of our own preferred learning pathways, the model of knowledge construction and problem solving suited to us as individuals, which is the most powerful outcome of education. This model can be based on the techniques of engineering, or indeed of biology, sociology or French literature – the key aspect is the long-term match between the mind and the paradigm, developing a worldview which supports courage and curiosity and enables discovery. As L. R. T. Williams states it: "The person is central to any model of problem-solving." (3) But this is not just true for individuals, but for a society as a whole: it will be the variety, rather than the technical advancement, of our approaches to the unexpected problems of the future,in all of their potential subtlety, complexity and moral ambiguity, that will vouchsafe our ability as societies, cultures, and potentially as a species to survive and thrive.

Final Considerations

It is in this contextthatan even more inclusive spirit of 'open learning' can be proposed, one which returns to the roots of learning: curiosity, and the desire to expand one's world, rather than being based on a fear of material deprivation through un- or underemployment. It is astonishing that Dewey was trying already in 1916 to turn his readers' attention away from institutions – that is schools- as the locus of education. In opposition to this, Dewey characterized education as lived and communicated experience, with social existence, and in particular the democratic co-creation of society, as the force which truly educates. Once learning can be released from the shackles of formal, institutional education, and of narrow notions of productivity, we can engage as citizens, rather than consumers, with the rich world full of opportunities to learn and share, to experience and communicate. The 21st century has already provided numerous instructive and exemplary developments, of on-line programmes for life-long learning, and of mainstream cyber-citizenship, which comprises not just headline-grabbing social media revolutions but also much more quotidian activities, like on-line petitions and local government service information pages. Positive technological interventions along cosmopolitan lines continue to emerge and establish themselves, as do the concomitant opportunities they bring for productive dialogue between the old and young, the waged and unwaged, the bearers of upcoming economic potential and those of experience and wisdom. Whether or not this leads to greater inclusion, and an enhanced social environment for learning from and with each other, is a choice still waiting to be made: with each on-line encounter, and each opportunity to shape our personal cyberspace as both citizens of the world, and of the world-wide web.

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