The Beneficial Effects of Restricting Internet Speech

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It is commonly held that the unregulated Internet promotes free speech. In this paper, I demonstrate the existence of suppressive speech on the Internet and its ability to stifle community speech. Community speech can exist only when suppressive speech is restricted.

Members frequent a given virtual community to: (1) communicate about particular topics, and (2) not communicate about others (i.e., non-community speech). Non-community speech reduces the utility of the virtual community in three ways. First, members must read a posting to ascertain whether it is community speech. As the proportion of non-community speech rises, members expend more effort to obtain community speech. Second, some non-community speech has negative utility. For example, Jewish virtual community members are better off avoiding anti-semitic speech. Finally, some speech (both community and non-community) encourages non-community speech. Flames and confrontational speech are examples of this third category.

In many situations, the presence of non-community speech creates the impetus to split a virtual community, thereby increasing speech diversity. Non-community speech becomes community speech in the old community, and dissatisfied members defect to the new one. However, some non-community speech (e.g., hate speech directed at community members) must be non-community speech to have its effect. Such speech can never become community speech and thus always has a suppressive effect.

To illustrate, consider the two Jewish UseNet newsgroups, soc.culture.jewish (SCJ), and soc.culture.jewish.moderated (SCJM). Both newsgroups were created as forums for the discussion of Jewish culture. SCJ is an unregulated newsgroup, while postings to SCJM are screened by a panel of moderators. As a result, many non-community postings appear on SCJ, but not SCJM. Consider this example of non-community speech:

> *Will they instead believe God in life even as they believed God at their Salvation and be saved from Satan s kingdom? Or will they reject God's promises, effectively calling Him a liar, again, as the Exodus generation?*
> What will be the outcome? February 28, 1999

The speech is defined as off-topic in the SCJ FAQ. It has negative utility, as it claims that all Jews go to hell. Finally, it promotes flame-wars. The speech is also "suppressive," because to exist, it must target a Jewish community. When Jews form alternate communities to discuss their issues (e.g., alt.humor.jewish), the suppressive speech pursues them. This causes Jews to stop participating in Jewish virtual communities.

> *the combination of the high volume of postings and the large portion of those which are either off-topic, indiscriminately crossposted … or anti-Semitic has driven many readers and posters away from the newsgroup.*
> RESULT: soc.culture.jewish.moderated moderated passes 212:34, July 9, 2000

When suppressive speech is controlled, community speech can flourish. Many Jews in SCJM state that:

> *I haven't been in that sewer [SCJ] since SCJM came on-line.*
> Re: Newbie/First-timer, June 25, 2003

In contrast, SCJ is now:

> *…a largely non-functional group dominated by anti-Semitic nutcases, with some shouting matches about Middle Eastern politics … for variety.*
> Re: Torah banned on soc.culture.jewish.moderated, April 7, 2001