

MILLER CENTER OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

DEBATE: THE INTERNET AND DEMOCRACY

MICAH L. SIFRY, PAUL SOLMAN, ANDREW KEEN, FARHAD MANJOO, JIMMY WALES

SOLMAN: Welcome to the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. and the Miller Center National Debates. I'm Paul Solman, Economics Correspondent for the PBS news hour. With literally lightening speed the Internet lets us share information and connects with people around the world -- down the block.

But might the unchecked nature of what's on the Internet be a threat to our society -- even to our democracy?

Here to debate the issue are four participants with deep and broad knowledge of the subject at hand. Arguing that the Internet may indeed pose a threat to democracy is Farhad Manjoo, a technology columnist for the Internet magazine, "Slate." He's also a frequent contributor to the New York Times, Time Magazine, and national public radio. And author of, "True Enough -- Learning to Live in a Post Fact Society."

Aligned with him, Andrew Keen, a Silicon Valley based entrepreneur. He's the author of, "The Cult of the Amateur -- How the Internet is Killing Our Culture." Meanwhile, arguing that the Internet is not a threat is Jimmy Wales, founder of Wikipedia, the international, collaborative, free encyclopedia on the Internet. And his teammate is Micah Sifry. Co-founder and Editor of, "The Personal Democracy Forum," a website and annual conference covering the way technology is changing politics.

Welcome to you all, and thanks for being here. Now before we begin the debate, a bit of background.

[PLAYING CLIP]

(REPORTER): Today 80 percent of Americans over age 17 say the Internet is a critical source of information. And Americans increasingly rank the Internet as a more important information source than television, radio, or newspapers. Traditional media with its reliance on editors and its deadline driven nature often is seen as biased and not always up to date.

On the other hand, information on the Internet relying on so-called crowd sourcing is up to the minute. But often without the benefit of having been filtered or fact checked by editors. As a result, it is sometimes hard to distinguish fact from opinion, or even from fiction.

[PLAYING CLIP]

(STEPHEN COLBERT): Cause you're looking at a straight shooter, America. I tell it like it is. I calls them like I see them. I will speak to you in plain, simple English. And that brings us to tonight's word. Truthiness. Now I'm sure some of the word police -- the "wordanistas" over at Websters are going to say, "Hey, that's not a word." Well, anybody who knows me know that I'm no fan of dictionaries or reference books. They're

elitist. Constantly telling us what is or isn't true, or what did or didn't happen.

Who's Britannica to tell me the Panama Canal was finished in 1914? If I want to say it happened in 1941, that's my right.

[END CLIP]

(REPORTER): Many suggest the Internet is accelerating disagreements over the most basic facts. For example, polls say about 20 percent of Americans think President Obama was not born in the U.S. despite his well publicized Hawaiian birth certificate. Even Eric Schmidt of Google has said the Internet risks becoming a cesspool of misinformation.

So is democracy threatened by the unchecked nature of information on the Internet? Or do the benefits of technology outweigh the problems? Spreading ideas and democracy around the world is one benefit of the Internet, supporters say. The Internet and other mobile technologies allow people in closed societies to access information. And in the case of Iran, help mobilize opposition forces.

But the technology is limited, and sometimes can be blocked by authorities. The Internet also can help people form new friendships and associations to share information and opinion. But how deep and how meaningful are these connections? Do they create silos where we only talk to like-minded people. When it comes to politics or civil discourse, is it harmful to democracy if we hear only opinions similar to our own and never listen to anything contradictory?

[PLAYING CLIP]

O'REILLY: It wasn't your fault. Come on, you coward.

[END CLIP]

(REPORTER): And has this silo effect on the Internet contributed to the level of harsh partisanship that we now see in Washington D.C. and throughout the country?

SOLMAN: And now, of course, truthiness is a word. But on to our debate. Each participant will have a three minute opening statement. Then we'll move to rebuttals. And a wider discussion, which I'll moderate here for about half an hour. The debate will conclude with two minute closing statements. Again, the debate resolution -- democracy is threatened by the unchecked nature of information on the Internet.

Up first, arguing that democracy is threatened is Farhad Manjoo, Technology Columnist for the web magazine, "Slate." Farhad?

MANJOO: Hi. Thank you, Paul, for being here. And I think that one of the things we all have taken granted -- taken for granted is that as people get more access to information, they'll be more informed, and then they'll make better, more -- better democratic choices. I want to point out some ways in which I think that's not the case.

So I think that Stephen Colbert was onto something when he -- when he talked about truthiness. And the basic idea I think that he -- he had sort of spotted is that we humans, all of us, have this innate psychological desire to choose people and choose information that reinforces our long-held beliefs.

And there are many, many psychological studies over decades that have proven this. But that didn't matter much in the days of three networks and a local newspaper when, you know, we had this limited choice for news. Nowadays we have this explosion in choice. And we can basically go wherever we want for news. We can go to, you know, our friends. We can get it on Facebook. We can get it from this huge explosion in cable, and talk radio.

So what happens? I think that one of the things that we're seeing happening is that people are going towards news sources that mainly reflect their own views. A few years ago there was this interesting study at Stanford where researchers asked people to read various news headlines. And then they put -- they saw -- they wanted to test how news logos affected what stories people would choose.

And they found that when they put the Fox News logo on a story it became much, much more attractive to Republicans. And it didn't matter if it was, you know, you would expect that would happen at the politic stories. But it happened on sports stories. People were, you know, had -- had concluded that Fox News was the place that they could trust if they had a conservative point of view.

On the other hand, Democrats completely were repulsed by the Fox News logo, and the NPR logo and -- and PBS logo were attractive to -- to Democrats. So I think that that's one example of how people actually get news these days. And I think it's led to another factor. The news organizations responding to that. Which is as you saw in the piece, one of the things that news organizations can do now is that they can pander to these specific audiences. So I think, you know, it's in their financial interest to respond to these niches and target them.

And then, you know, you have this sort of symbiotic relationship where news organizations tell you what you want and you go to them, cause they're telling you what you want. And I think that has to be, you know, at root one of the causes for many, many of the completely untrue things we hear in the media these days from all corners. And so that can't be good for a democracy.

SOLMAN: Thank you. Now arguing that democracy is not threatened -- not surprisingly -  
- Jimmy Wales, founder of Wikipedia. Jimmy?

WALES: Great. Thank you. So democracy is all about people deciding. It's about people who are passionately engaged -- engaging in politics, going to the polls, talking to different people. Basically, it's the deliberative process of coming together as a society to figure out what we want to do.

And so the Internet is -- is very much a reflection of that. We have many different avenues, many different places on the Internet where people are doing this. We have

blogs where we have people who are coming together and engaging in sometimes quite combative, but very deep analysis. The kinds of analysis that you cannot get from a traditional newspaper simply because there isn't enough space for people to really dig into the issues in the way that they do in blogs.

Of course, at Wikipedia we have a place where people come together. People who have very widely different opinions come together. But because of our neutrality policy, and the way that we try to function as a community, they come together to find some kind of a shared understanding of the basic facts. So at Wikipedia you won't find an argument, you know, one sided, or -- or the other side for or against something. What you'll find is an entry that tries to explain to you what's actually in the healthcare bill? That's the kind of thing that people really want to know. And they're very passionate about it.

And one of the reasons I think that we're having a crisis, and a decline in the circulation of newspapers is precisely that people don't feel like they get that kind of neutral analysis, except by turning to each other on the Internet. And I don't think we should really romanticize the past. Certainly we've had highly partisan media for many, many years. And in fact when we look at the media for the past 100 years or so, what we have come to, and what we have had has been with broadcast media through television, radio. Newspapers was also a broadcast medium.

We have broadcast politics. And by that I mean the politics of a sound byte. Who looks best in the debates? Who -- who has the -- the greatest joke? Who has the best line? I don't think that's good for democracy. I think when we turn on the television and we see Bill O'Reilly screaming at someone -- calling him a coward and a moron, or whatever he's saying. That's not good for democracy. That isn't deliberation. That isn't thoughtful people coming together in the way that they do online.

And I think one of the reasons they're coming together online is precisely they turn on the television and they see, wow. There's an idiot screaming at another idiot. I don't care. You know? It's time to go actually understand the issue.

So I think all of these things are really important. And of course, I think we can't neglect that there are bad things on the Internet. There -- there's bad information. There's misinformation. There's a lot of noise. But when we want to really think about the proposition that we have before us tonight, we have to always remember to look at the net effect. We can't just look at one bad thing, or another bad thing.

We have to say summed up, all together in total is this phenomenon as a whole good or bad for democracy? I say having people talking to each other about real issues is always good for democracy.

SOLMAN: And you -- you slipped in a little subliminal phrase there -- the net effect. I -- I...

WALES: The net effect.

SOLMAN: ... thought that was very clever. Now again, the Internet is threat -- Andrew Keen, the Silicon Valley based entrepreneur, author, and also on -- on the Internet. It's really striking that both people who are talking about the threat to the Internet make their livings off the Internet. OK?

Please Andrew?

KEEN: Yes. But we're authorities. Not like the people edit Jimmy's website. So I think the resolution is a little dodgy in the sense that it depends of course what you mean by democracy. Jimmy's definition of democracy was an anti-federalist position. A sort of an idealized direct democracy rhetoric which suggests that it's all -- and I'm quoting him now. He says it's -- "It's all about the people deciding."

But of course at the foundation of this country, which is a representative democracy. It's not a direct democracy. In which -- that the federalists won over the anti-federalists. The premise of democracy is not about the people deciding. It's about finding educated, high quality political figures who will make wise decisions about the community.

So I think Jimmy is falling into the old trap of -- of appropriating democracy for his own ends. Jimmy said that, "The Internet is a reflection of this." "This" of course meaning direct democracy. One of the mistakes that we make about the -- one of the mistakes we make about the Internet is that it's technology. It isn't. It's ideology. The Internet was built by people who questioned authority.

The Internet is bound up in a fundamental assault on the notion of expertise, on what Jimmy calls main stream media which in -- which includes shows like this, New York Times, Wall Street Journal. And the idea that representative democracy, experts whether in media or in politics, in the arts, in legal affairs and intellectual affairs, are unreliable and need to be replaced by what Jimmy calls the people is deeply dangerous.

It's no coincidence that the real founders of this country -- guys like Madison, and -- and Hamilton, were very serious students of antiquity. And in their studies of Greece, and in Rome, and of middle -- and of the renaissance, they focused on the consequences of direct democracy. They focused on the way in which political systems are wrecked by the mob. What I most fear about the Internet is not the technology, which as Paul says we all use.

I am as addicted to the Internet as everybody else. What I fear most about the Internet is the way in which we take this technology, which has no center, which is flattened, which has done away with all authority and expertise. We take this technology to prove the ideological -- idealized democratic theories of Jimmy Wales. The truth is, we need expertise. We need authority. We need to remind ourselves of the foundations of representative democracy.

SOLMAN: There's an opening remark, which is a rebuttal already. Quite deftly done, I guess.

Finally, opening remarks from Micah Sifry, co-founder, Editor of The Personal

Democracy Forum. Micah?

SIFRY: Good to be here. Thank you.

I'd like to remind Andrew that America was also founded by people who questioned unrepresentative authority. And I guess it's good to have a Brit defending the crown here. The -- the -- the first think I -- I -- when -- when I was asked to participate in this, I was astounded that there would be anybody who would defend the notion that democracy is threatened by the unchecked nature of information on the Internet.

Democracy is expanded and enriched by the free flow of information. That's why we have a first amendment. Enshrining the freedom of the press. What's new about the Internet is that it has put the press in the hands of everyone. We all own a press now. It's no longer A. J. Liebling's saying freedom of the press belongs to them who own one.

We can all participate effectively in the public conversation. Ten years ago the only way you could do that -- the only way you could enter into the public conversation was either you had to be rich, you had to do something to get yourself on television, or you buy yourself that -- that exposure. Today there's no guarantee that every single blogger -- every single person who publishes online is going to get attention. They still have to say something compelling and valuable enough that other people want to share it.

But that to me is a much better threshold than this old, (inaudible) notion that we should trust the experts and trust the authorities. I don't really need to remind people who often the experts are wrong. I was -- sat down with the book, "The Experts Speak," which is a wonderful compendium of examples. And read about how the experts told us that we would be greeted as liberators in Iraq. Experts like William Kristol, who told us that the war was already won in Afghanistan as well as in Iraq. That Iraqis have always been secular. This is all the words of experts.

I will much rather trust a free and very open debate than the notion that the experts are here to guide us. And to the point that Farhad is making. That actually -- and -- and by the way as I listened, I -- I waited for you to actually talk about the Internet as the thing that is causing people to become polarized. And instead you told us about news organizations that are pandering the way Fox panders to the right. Or some other cable shows may pander to the left.

So maybe it's unchecked behavior by cable shows who are detrimental to democracy. But it seems to me that this notion that the Internet is creating silos is a complete myth. You are far more likely to encounter people who you disagree with, or ideas that you disagree with online than you will ever do in person. There is much more segregation in America in face to face interaction than in interaction with the people you actually know, than with the people who you encounter online.

SOLMAN: Wow. Does that ever set you up for the rebuttal? How about it? So the -- the rebuttal goes, I mean, to Farhad Manjoo, who thinks democracy is threatened. We are siloed. And it isn't the result of the Internet.

Please have at it?

MANJOO: No. I think that -- I -- so I agree that there is -- that one of the things we've gotten from the Internet is more analysis, more fact checking, more information, and better information. But the problem -- the -- the problem when setting that up as -- as the -- kind of the answer to the question is that we don't -- we don't -- we can all ignore it. We -- we can have great analysis. We can have, you know, FACTCHECK.ORG, POLITIFACT that tells us, you know, you -- you can go out and find any -- easily investigate anything you want, but the fact is that people don't. People routinely ignore those sites and pass along information only because they've heard it from other people online, or in this, you know, this echo chamber that involves both the Internet and cable news and talk radio. I mean it—Jimmy mentioned that we have this sort of this net—he wanted to look at the net affect.

You know, over the last two years the percentage of people who believe that Barack Obama is not an American citizen, or is a Muslim, has grown. It's not—it hasn't, you know, we have had investigations by the mainstream media, by the Internet. But the fact that people can join up together online and find each other where they couldn't before. I mean you wouldn't—there's not that many people around you who would believe you if you made that claim before. But now you can find these people and you can sort of join and come into groups that you couldn't in the past. And these myths, as a result, kind of live on much longer than they would have, I think, before.

SOLMAN: Jimmy, you have the second rebuttal and then we go to the mixing it up part.

WALES: Yes, very good. So, I think the main thing that I wanted to do here is quote Andrew, who is quite a clever guy, and someone whose thoughts I think we should all respect. And one of the things he said is that need expertise and we need authority and I couldn't possibly agree more. I think that it is a complete fallacy to imagine, though, that the Internet is somehow incompatible with expertise and authority. What we need is—it is not either or. What we need is to have expertise, to have authority, to have open conversation, have big dialogue and one of the great things about the Internet is that expertise and authority can now emerge in ways that it couldn't in the past.

In the past if there is a new Supreme Court nominee, I hear about it on television and then I hear pundits on television discussing it. Today, I go and read the blogs of various law professors who are actually analyzing her track record, analyzing statements she's said. It is much more detailed because those experts, who would not have had a voice in the past, because they are just some obscure law professor who is interested in a certain area of the law, now have a much bigger voice. So, what we need actually, on the Internet is social mechanism that drive people toward thoughtfulness and quality. That is really important. Just, you know, we're not going to get great analysis from looking at random Twitter feeds and things like this. We really need those kinds of social mechanisms.

But again, to quote Andrew, who is quite a clever fellow, that is not about technology, it is about ideas. It is about bringing people together in a thoughtful way to produce

things of quality. The Internet is a great tool for doing that.

SOLMAN: Let's take this now, sort of topic at a time. Because you have thrown out there a number of different topics. And, Andrew, I'm quoting Jimmy here, you are a clever guy.

KEEN: He doesn't mean it I bet.

(LAUGHTER)

SOLMAN: But I do.

Silos, let's just stick with silos for a minute. Does the Internet encourage people who would not otherwise find each other no matter how kooky their ideas might be, to do so, to be reinforced in those ideas and make them more as opposed to less narrow minded.

KEEN: When you say silos, you mean echo chambers?

SOLMAN: Well, echo chambers is the other term of art. Yes, echo chambers, silos, you talk to people who already agree with you.

KEEN: I think that the mistake is to separate the Internet from the general culture. There is clearly a general cultural problem with the echo chambers. There is clearly more and more of a failure in America of people of different political persuasions to respectfully and creatively talk about the issues. That is both in mainstream media and on the Internet. I think the Internet is a reflection of an increasingly fragmented world, an increasingly, ironically given that we are supposed to be living in this social media age, an increasingly lonely fragmented, isolated age, in which we sit in front of our computers. We have less and less physical contact with everybody else. And we are more and more convinced of our own ideas.

I don't think one can blame the Internet for that. You know, anyone who has ever switched on FOX understands that you can't blame the Internet for ignorant, sort of mob rule kind of media. But I do think—I do want to pick up one thing that Micah made, which I don't want him to let him get away with, because he is a very intelligent chap.

(LAUGHTER)

Sometimes. He gave the impression that media was controlled by the rich. That media—and I don't know about your bank account, but you don't strike me as someone who was born into some kind of aristocracy. I think it is one of the fundamental illusions, or delusions, about this critique of mainstream media. That somehow before the Internet it was just the rich, the privileged who controlled media. That it was a racket. And then the Internet came along and suddenly the people had a voice. And that is simply nonsense. I mean we are all, the four of us are, a part of an Internet elite, which is no more or less of an elite than in traditional media.



But I am very trouble with this idea of the Internet replacing a flawed meritocracy. It is simply wrong.

SOLMAN: All right. Let's take that and we'll get back to silos. I can see this is going to be a herding cats kind of operation. But, please, if you would respond.

SIFRY: Sure, sure.

Well, Andrew, who is a highly intelligent fellow—

(LAUGHTER)

SIFRY: Uh, the problem is that to get onto the national stage, before the Internet existed was practically impossible for an ordinary person. You had to be famous, you had to be rich, or you had to convince one of the gatekeepers to put you on air. Or fall into a well, and become national news because of some random event.

And so, that is what I mean by the old system being worse than the new one. I agree, the new one is messy, it is fragmented, it is confusing. We are going through a gigantic transition where the old model for serious news production is being undermined by all this free stuff. And some of the old legacy newspapers are going to die. We know that. But there are new forms of newsgathering and production and sharing that are evolving and some of them are just as professional as the ones that you love, and that I love. But they operate in a different environment, where they are not worrying about trucking the newspaper, and printing it, and so on. So, I'm not so worried about that future for serious news.

And then the issue about silos, because I think we really have to stay on this. There is a lot of fog blown around here, that people just basically expressing their fears, without any data. And so I really want to point folks to a new study that was done by the University of Chicago, that actually looked at about 1,500 news sites and the traffic to those sites, based on data that various tracking agencies, like ComScore pulled for these researchers. And what they found is that visitors to extreme conservative sites, like RushLimbaugh.com, are more likely to have visited a liberal mainstream news site, like The New York Times, than a typical online news reader. And visitors to extreme liberal sites, like ThinkProgress, or Moveon.org, are more likely to have visited FOX News, than a typical online news reader.

And that, in fact, there are two types of things going on here. The low news user online, the grazer, the person who just checks the news, they mainly go to a few big, fairly centrist sites, like CNN.com, USAToday, Yahoo News, that are more or less in the middle and they are just for people who are just checking whatever the top headlines are for the day. And then the political junkies, who everybody thinks are in these horrible silos, where they only talk to themselves and reinforce the worst extremes, are actually all over the place. They are not just at FOX News, they are at FOX, they are at The New York Times, and every where else.

SOLMAN: Aren't those, many of those people who are migrating just migrating in order

to attack? I mean, that's—

SIFRY: No, I think what they're doing is they are—the problem for the brands, the legacy newspapers, the legacy news organizations is that brand loyalty is dying, but that people graze now. We go wherever information may be.

SOLMAN: OK, so well you can come in on defending your side, or going on to silos, either one. You are near genius, after all, and so.

(LAUGHTER)

WALES: And you are very good looking.

(LAUGHTER)

SOLMAN: For my age, I take that as an apt comment.

WALES: Yes, so I mean the silo issue is a very interesting one and I would actually say, I don't think we have enough data yet. Certainly you can silo yourself, but I don't think that has ever been untrue. And so, what affect is it having overall, I don't think we really know yet. I believe that it is really more, as Micah was saying, that people go to certain sites and maybe you are right, they go to the opposing site, just to see what those idiots are saying.

SIFRY: Well, and to say things to those idiots, that's my experience.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: And that is actually not siloing anymore.

WALES: That's not siloing, right? It maybe a different problem, but it is not siloing.

The other thing that happens a lot is, you know, now Wikipedia is the fifth most popular web site in the world. Almost any topic that would be of any interest to anyone politically or otherwise, you go to Google and you say, oh, I'm very curious about I heard this Nick Clegg guys is creating a stir in England. Who is he? I've never really heard of him before. And there you are going to get the Wikipedia entry, which is basically very neutral and just, you know, trying to lay out who is and so and so forth.

KEEN: Jimmy, you really believe it is neutral?

WALES: Oh, yeah.

KEEN: You ever check out my entry on Wikipedia?

SOLMAN: Well, this is an important point, but not so much your entry, but

(CROSS TALK)

But what is you entry? What is wrong with it?

KEEN: My entry is a funny one. And it shows, I think, the problem with this media. I was on the Colbert show and Colbert is a comedy show. We take it seriously, but it is comedy. And at one point Colbert—and I was trying to be as serious as I possibly could—and everyone warned me on Colbert, the one thing you mustn't do is make a joke. And I, of course, didn't listen to that. So, at one point Colbert turned to me and he said—because I had written this book saying how the Internet is killing our culture, which of course he loved. And Colbert said, "So, Mr. Keen, is the Internet worse than the Nazis?"

(LAUGHTER)

KEEN: Oh, he brought up the Nazis. You know, there is law on the Internet, I think, what is it called?

SIFRY: Godwin's Law.

KEEN: Yes, after a 30-second debate the Nazis usually come up, which I, of course, have done here. But anyway, so he made some remark about the Nazis. And I thought I'd make a joke, since I'm supposed to be so clever.

(LAUGHTER)

So, I said, oh, Mr. Colbert, Stephen the Internet is worse than the Nazis. Now, I was joking. I'm Jewish. In a previous life I studied Germany very seriously. I'm under no illusion. Even Wikipedia is better than the Nazis.

(LAUGHTER)

KEEN: But now, when you go to my Wikipedia page it says, Andrew Keen says that the Internet is worse than the Nazis. Now why does it say that? It says it because there is not an editor. Because there is no central control and because a lot of people don't like me; I'm supposed to be the anti-Christ of Silicon Valley, blah, blah, blah. But what Wikipedia is lacking—

SIFRY: That is what it says on your Twitter handle.

(LAUGHTER)

I'm not joking. It does.

KEEN: I'm AJKeen, by the way, on Twitter.

But what Jim is—actually I use it all the time. But what Jim's excellent web site lacks is a curatorial class. People who are able to say, well, yeah, he did say that, but that was a joke show so it shouldn't go in his bio.

SOLMAN: And, of course, this is now not silos, this is expertise, I had a similar

experience not quite so pointed, with a newspaper that I used to be the editor of in the early '70s, and it is up there on Wikipedia, which I use all the time. But up on Wikipedia is this newspaper story, as told by one minor figure in the newspaper, making it sound as if it were his. And no one has sort of had the—I don't know—the wherewithal, audacity, chutzpah, whatever the word is, to say hey, wait a second and re-write it.

So, not every—plenty of stuff up there is partisan, yes?

WALES: I wouldn't say partisan. Maybe in Andrew's case, but I think tomorrow when you go there it will say that he's grudgingly conceded that Wikipedia is not quite as bad as the Nazis.

(LAUGHTER)

We make progress. It is called dialogue. No, but it is true that of course, Wikipedia is always a work in progress. One of the things that we normally do that is quite good is warn you. We say the neutrality of this entry has been disputed. Which even Colbert has had fun with that line because it is so famous now from people seeing it on Wikipedia. But I think it is important to recognize that perfection is not a valid standard for anything. We know that there are errors in newspapers everyday. We know that there is biased reporting in everything. And we can accept that this is part of the human condition. What we need to do is think about what are the mechanism to reduce or minimize this. And so within Wikipedia we do have a curatorial class. We have the administrators who are quite thoughtful.

KEEN: You do pay them, right?

WALES: No, no, no, they are all quite passionate volunteers, who are really excited about sharing knowledge and working for quality and so forth.

KEEN: But passion doesn't pay mortgages.

WALES: No, it doesn't pay mortgages that's right, which means that if you have a job as the author of an encyclopedia you may have an economic problem today. Simply because there are people who are very passionate, and very good at it, who are willing to do it as a hobby. Which is certainly a very interesting change in the world, that you know, we all have to think about.

SOLMAN: Democracy, mob rule, do you agree with him about this?

MANJOO: Can I just ask this? Can I just make a point a point about silos, though?

SOLMAN: You can actually say anything you want.

MANJOO: Right. So, you're right, this Chicago study is one study that suggested that perhaps people aren't siloing themselves. There have been others that have suggested that maybe the blog—the people who read blogs are siloing themselves. There was a study about four years ago, three or four years ago, that suggested that blogs on the

right were linking mainly to other right-wing blogs. Left-wing blogs were linking mainly to other left-wing blogs. And I think that the other thing that we should remember about silos is that even if it is true that—that sort of—even if people aren't siloing themselves online, what we are seeing more and more is that the extreme points of views that we're getting from—that couldn't have been introduced into national discussion in the past are being introduced now by this sort of entry mechanism. People put it on blogs and then it gets picked up by cable news and then it becomes a national discussion by virtue of the fact that it was.

SIFRY: So, what? How does that threaten democracy? I mean, you know, you can say that it is messier, but what I still have not heard is why this is such a terrible thing and why the Internet is this great threat. Remember, that is the proposition that you are here to defend. That democracy is threatened by the unchecked nature of the information on the Internet, so defend it.

KEEN: I think that you do have to make the point, Micah, that the core question here is whether the Internet, and of course, when one speaks of the Internet, one is talking simultaneously of highly curated media like "The New York Times" and Wikipedia, which has very little curation. So, it is a little tricky. But the core question in my mind about democracy is whether the Internet culture, if you like, this highly democratized media where everyone becomes an author, where we do away with the old structures of power, where we undermine 20th century meritocracy, and we replace it with this 21st century, what I would call, perhaps, mob rule, what you would call democracy. Whether that was—

SIFRY: No, I actually—

KEEN: Let me just finish. Whether that would lend itself to the production of a better informed citizenry.

SIFRY: Well, we don't know, actually on that point I would say the greater access to information is—could be part of what will get us a better informed citizenry. But what I'm concerned about here is what gets us a better democracy. And what I fear much more is that control on information is what entrenches power. And that freedom of information is how we check power. The problem that the Internet is helping solve is that it is now easier to raise questions into the public debate that need to be raised. The information that otherwise might be suppressed is harder to suppress. And that that is a fundamental good thing for democracy. The greater transparency that more timely availability of information, I can look up what you said. And the video will be there on YouTube. And I can then put it to you, well, you said, it here. And now you are saying the opposite. But this is vital for accountability of power. And whether that—whether every single citizen is going to be better informed is almost a secondary question.

SOLMAN: Is there no issue here of civility, the civility that something like this forum represents.

My own experience with the Internet, which is not inconsiderable, and that of a friend of mine, a Yale professor who just posted something on "The Financial Times", wrote

something in "The Financial Times" and was literally appalled by the—what came back at him.

SOLMAN: There is this attack mode, is there not? There is this letting go of your aggression because you don't have to use your name and you don't see the other person. It is kind of like the toxic assets you can sell because you are selling it to somebody, you know, the buyer doesn't know the seller. No? Am I crazy?

WALES: I think this is correct. I think there is a problem of civility and I think it is very important. Just to give you an example I just recently wrote an editorial, co-authored an editorial about civility on the Internet. It was published in "The Wall Street Journal", there on the web site. It took about four or five comments before the commentators were screaming at each other about Obama and Bush, which had, by the way, nothing to do with what I wrote.

SOLMAN: Yes, my point, exactly yes.

WALES: What I think we need to recognize is that we have to work for social mechanism that drive towards quality and thoughtfulness. And that we are still very much at the beginnings of that. We have some hints of it here and there. We have Wikipedia, which is, of course human beings do argue, but it is mostly a fairly civil environment and we have rules like no personal attacks and you can get blocked pretty quickly for yelling at people or calling them Nazis. But we have other places on the Internet, particularly newspapers, that haven't really figured out how to engage their audiences in a way that's productive. And instead, what we have is sort of comment boards at the bottom that are mostly sort of useless angry people screaming at each other.

I do think it's a problem that needs to be solved, but it's a -- it's a mechanism problem.

KEEN: I don't agree it is a -- and you call this -- I don't know what a social mechanism is. It sounds very painful.

(LAUGHTER)

KEEN: I mean it's really very simple. The issue is one of anonymity. It's not the Internet. So when you look at non-anonymous sites and -- and networks like Facebook and Twitter, actually, the level of civility is much higher.

The problem is one of anonymity. And I think it extends to something broader in terms of the way in which many people see the Internet as a right and not a responsibility.

Jeff Jarvis, who I think we're all friendly with, said that the Internet is the next society. And he may be right.

In the 18th century, when we were figuring out modern industrial society, we came up with social contract theory about rights and responsibilities.

I think the same is true of the Internet. It's a reality, for better or worse. It -- it is perhaps the central fact of social culture and political life in the 21st century. And it needs to be understood not only in terms of rights, of taking, of stealing, of getting it for free and all the other problems associated with the Internet, but also one of responsibility.

And the key responsibility in the West -- I'm not talking about Iran or China, where one is jailed for one's opinions. But I think the key responsibility in our relatively democratic culture is to reveal who you are. I think when you do away with anonymity, then you basically solve the problem of civility. We're all respectful, all except for Micah, of course...

(LAUGHTER)

KEEN: -- because we can look each other in the eye. If we were hidden, we would be bushing and O'Reillying and all the rest of it.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Right. You -- I don't disagree with you at all, Andrew. I -- I actually think...

KEEN: Can I quote you on that?

(LAUGHTER)

SIFRY: I -- I respect you so much, I brought your book with me. But the -- the -- you're right that anonymity is a problem and it's a -- and it's allowed both wonderful and terrible things to be expressed online. There are certain forms of anonymity online that give people who otherwise could never have found vital, vital help because they live in a community where they're a minority of some kind and they cannot possibly talk openly to the people in their small town. And they find the help they need online.

So it's a double-edged sword.

But to go to what matters, what the Internet is doing to our democratic culture, I think it's -- it's fair to note that the trend has been toward owning your words and using your real name and that people who started out as anonymous bloggers, in many, many cases, have now come forward and are -- are using their names...

SOLMAN: Or were outed. Against their will...

SIFRY: Well, in some cases, I know some African-American bloggers, for example, who started the blog Jack and Jill Politics who had to be anonymous originally because they didn't know whether they were going to get death threats and whether they were -- they'd -- they'd be hounded out of their communities for writing what they were writing. I...

KEEN: Why would they get death threats?

SIFRY: Because this -- there's still racism in America, that's why. And that -- they were fearful as a minority using their own name online. And they have both -- Cheryl Contee and Baratunde Thurston now both blog in their own names because the -- this transition that we're going through, there's been a shift.

And I think you have to earn your reputation every day online. And that is the pressure to use your real name. People who comment anonymously, they really don't affect anything.

MANJOO: I...

SOLMAN: Please. Please.

MANJOO: Well, I think that -- I think that we're getting to some agreement here. I think we're all agreeing that it's kind -- it's a social problem instead of a technology problem. But if it's a social problem, then I think we have to recognize that that takes a long time to solve, that adjusting to it is going to take decades, maybe. And that in this time, it will be -- we -- we might face more information online or in the news that's false. We might have more people believing things that aren't true as a result of this change.

I mean I guess it's what you call messiness. But it might be messy for a long time, is what I'm saying.

MANJOO: Can we do the social mechanism point that you were -- you were responding to?

Is there a role for government to play, then, in policing this system -- I mean checking the Internet?

You -- you've just been yourself involved in a -- in a controversy this last -- just last week, right, where you were accused by editors within Wikipedia of exercising too much authority, right, because you were removing what you thought to be sexually offensive material. There's a story that had come out on that. You removed it from the Web sites. You said it was all over, or at least what I read was that you had said it was all over Wikipedia. And you removed it and then your editors came back at you.

I mean should you be, genius that you are, the -- the head of the Internet, should we have Liu Kwan Hu (ph) imported from Singapore?

How do we deal with this?

WALES: Well, I mean I think that we do need governance structures. But those governance structures need to be flexible. They need to be, you know, aware of different opinions. And they don't have to be, certainly not from the government. I don't think anyone in this room would really suggest it's a good idea to repeal the First Amendment and have the government regulate what information is online.

I think within, you know, the Wikipedia world, what I would say to that is it's messy.



One of the interesting things about Wikipedia is that we do all of our work publicly and in the open. And the kinds of disagreements and tussles and struggles within the community that would normally, at "The Encyclopedia Britannica," go on behind closed doors, we do in public, because that's the way we do our work.

So I don't think it's really, you know -- it doesn't indicate any reason to think that the government should step in and do it.

Now, at the same time, there is a role for law. And certainly all of the kinds of law that has applied to speech over the years, libel and things like this, does need to be re-examined, thought about.

How do we adapt it to the Internet age?

How do we deal with the problem of anonymous libel, for example, where it can be very hard to track someone.

Those are interesting questions that I do think there's room for improvement in the law. But that's really not about the government deciding about information. It's about applying very traditional notions of what's the boundaries of free speech.

SOLMAN: certifying authorities -- I -- I wrote to a couple of economists today and asked -- telling them about this debate. One of them said, Dan Ariely, a psychologist, really, he said we need a certifying authority. He didn't specify whether it was government or not.

Yes?

Will that help you with keeping expertise in its -- on its pedestal?

KEEN: I -- I don't -- a certifying authority, what, like a -- I don't know how that would work.

SOLMAN: I think he tossed it. It was off the top of his head. But I -- just the idea...

KEEN: Well, I think what Micah talks about is the reality, which is we are building a reputation rooted culture, where we're doing away with the old structures, the old bureaucracies, the old hierarchies of media. And what is, for better or worse emerging, are -- are people like ourselves, pundits who actually peddle our wares on the Internet and self-promote or self-develop our work.

What most concerns me, though, is it's fine for guys like us. We get our book contracts. We -- we do consulting. But what we haven't brought up is economics. What we haven't brought up is to have a viable democracy, you need well informed citizens. To have well informed citizens, you need reliable media, on or offline. It doesn't matter whether it's electronic or physical. It makes no difference.

But if you don't have editors, if you don't have professional journalists, then you don't have well informed citizens. What we haven't brought up today is the fact that...

SIFRY: But there's...

KEEN: -- more and more professional media people are being laid off and the Internet economy is still struggling to figure out a coherent business model.

SOLMAN: And there's a guy who's made his living...

SIFRY: OK, so... Ten -- ten -- the -- if you just look at the technology sphere online, the richness of that space in terms of the amount of reporting by professionals compared to what we had 20 years ago, when the only thing you could get if you wanted information on Apple was "Mac World" and it only came once a month, is quite stunning.

So I think we're going through a transition and we will still see plenty of people to be...

KEEN: Transition, though, is...

SIFRY: Yes.

KEEN: -- is...

SIFRY: Well, print is dying.

KEEN: We've been going through a transition. I've been in this business since the mid-'90s. We always talk about transition. When people use that word, what they're really saying is they can't figure out the future.

SIFRY: Well, that's true, we can't.

KEEN: And it's true.

SIFRY: I wouldn't predict the future here because I'd probably be wrong.

KEEN: And you used the word rich, Micah. I mean surely you were using that ironically. No one's getting rich. No one's being paid. So the only way to produce high quality media...

SIFRY: Oh...

KEEN: -- on something like Wikipedia is to do it in your spare time.

SIFRY: Actually, that -- Andrew, you know, that's one of the many errors in your book, where you say that no one is getting rich...

KEEN: I thought you said that was smart.

SIFRY: -- off the Internet.

(LAUGHTER)

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Clever doesn't mean right.

(CROSSTALK)

SIFRY: I -- I actually want to go back to the question about the government.

SOLMAN: Well, you're -- you were actually -- we're actually 30 seconds from...

SOLMAN: -- your closing statement.

So how about you segue into your closing statement with -- right now?

SIFRY: OK. OK. Fine.

The -- the -- the issue was whether there's a role for government here. And I want to make two suggestions, because as we enter the brave new world, there -- there is a role for government.

The first one is that we need to understand that the Internet is the dial tone of our time, OK?

And in the same way in the 1930s, when the telephone was spreading, but not spreading to everyone, we instituted, under the Universal Service Act, the idea that we would subsidize delivery of dial tone to poor people in rural -- rural areas.

And today, we need to do the same thing in terms of affordable high speed broadband so that everybody can be connected.

That's -- government's role is equal access to this vital infrastructure.

The second one is that on this problem of authority, government is actually a repository of a tremendous amount of authoritative data. And whether it's the data of who's trying to get what out of government or what they're getting, who's trying to influence government, sunlight is the best of disinfectants, as my friends at the Sunlight Foundation like to say. And that government needs to move into the 21st century and stop hoarding information. After all, we paid for this information. And so your concern about this...

SOLMAN: We paid for this, meaning the DARPA started this. It was a Defense Department...

SIFRY: No, I mean also that that -- all that information that's collected -- environmental, health...

SOLMAN: Oh, the information.

SIFRY: -- lobbyist disclosures, all of that...

SOLMAN: Not just the...

SIFRY: I -- I should be able to get that online. In fact, we shouldn't even think of it as being public unless it's made available to us online.

And so my -- and I make this point because I think that the problem which -- you're raising -- I -- I don't disagree. It is disconcerting to have to deal with people who believe that Barack Obama is -- is not an American citizen and what to do about that. But I don't think the answer is to somehow regulate speech or, you know, put the bad speech in a corner somewhere. The way we deal with bad speech is with better speech and more speech and authoritative information. There are plenty of sources for it.

I think the -- the future is bright. I have no fear, except for people who would say that democracy is actually threatened by the unchecked nature of information on the Internet.

SOLMAN: Well, you've got two minutes to respond to that.

You get the closing statement, Andrew Keen.

KEEN: Well, I -- I think that we have danced around the subject. There are a couple of key issues. The one is economics, which I wished we'd got into more. We still -- the Internet or the digital age or a disinter mediated media hasn't figured out a model to pay journalists, hasn't figured out a model to pay musicians. And I think until we figure out that model, we are creating an increasingly amateurized culture. Now I'm not sure -- you know, I -- the subtitle of my book is "How the Internet is Killing Our Culture." It's not really the Internet, though. It's us. The Internet is a mirror, for better or worse. When we look at it, we're staring at ourselves.

And when we look at the Internet today, what I think we see is not Micah's notion of sunlight, but the anger. What we see is a continuing and obsessing obsessive questioning of authority. That's not what democracy is.

Representative democracy is built on building a coherent system of government which will elect wise people to govern in the name of the people. Democracy is not about incessantly bashing tradition, undoing meritocracy, claiming that all dominant institutions are controlled by the rich.

Now, I'm not saying that the Internet creates that. The Internet is just technology. But the Internet reflects a series of values about questioning authority. It was built in my area, my neck of the woods, Northern California. But until we understand that the absence of a center in the Internet is ideology and is not a reflection of the natural state of things, I think our democracy will continue to suffer, because for better or worse, the Internet is all we have. As physical, analog, mainstream media dies, we're going to be left with this thing, like it or not.

SOLMAN: Well, there's a very grim way to end, like it or not.

(LAUGHTER)

SOLMAN: Although maybe not so grim, right?

I like it...

SOLMAN: What?

SIFRY: I like it.

SOLMAN: He likes it.

(LAUGHTER)

SOLMAN: Well, then it's not a grim way to end it all.

It's a lot to mull over, in any case, for the rest of our lives, I suppose.

Thank you to our debaters, Farhad Manjoo, technology columnist at "Slate" magazine; and Andrew Keen, a Silicon Valley based entrepreneur, author of "The Cult of the Amateur" and "Developing Your Own TV or Video on the Internet," as we speak, right?

And their opposition, Jimmy Wales, the smartest man who ever lived and founder of Wikipedia. And Micah Sifry, no slouch himself, co-founder and editor of The Personal Democracy Forum.

For more information about this and future debates, you go to The Miller Center Web site. And for our broadcast, you check the listings of your local PBS station, which I would urge you to do.

On behalf of The Miller Center, I'm Paul Solman.

Thank you for watching.