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Youth and the Internet

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It's necessary to understand and respond to Internet dimensions of opportunity and harm as they relate to young people.

It's also critical to understand what the world of Internet might mean for our and especially their future.

What hath God wrought?

In 1844 Samuel Morris electronically telegraphed the above four words from Washington to his colleague in Baltimore. The message seemingly traveled like magic through space and time. Morris, along with the world, was stunned.

What sort of world would we create when humanity could break the ancient bonds of distance to connect?

Could this change everything?

In 1970 Vinton Cerf also emailed four important and questioning words to his colleague David Clark as they completed the architecture for a worldwide broadcasting platform available to everyone. It would be termed the Internet.

We can easily answer the second question but only shed a bit of light on the first.

Change

The Internet has reconfigured every facet of humanity including work, education, commerce, products, services, war, medicine, religion, and human relationships. Even our perceptions of reality have been altered, usually providing precision, but also sometimes distorted interpretations.

The values of instantly sharing of information are self-evident. Things get created faster and are transported



with amazing efficiency. Scientific inquiry proceeds with fantastic speed and effectiveness. Public service and private enterprise have made productive use of powerful new tools. Medicine and engineering blend rapidly with research findings to humanities great advantage. For most of the world the quality of life has been definably enriched.

Yet, there are threats and casualties with these new mediums of communication. Most specifically creating new categories of cybercrime, generally targeting the naïve. Typically, naïveté encompasses youth.

Youth at Risk

Young people are skillful in mastering the technical mechanisms of cyberspace, but understandably oblivious to the often-exploitive ways of the world. Many innocently wander into tragic territory. As an example, cynical

gambling websites target young people, understanding that they are easily persuaded to engage in destructively costly games of chance. As a group young people have a high percentage of “vulnerable suckers.”

More tragically teens between the age of 14 and 17 are targeted on private messaging platforms like Snapchat or Google Chat. Extortionists pretending to be young and romantically inclined connect and send erotic pictures, allegedly of themselves, asking their “new intimate friends” to reciprocate. The young responders are then told that unless they pay the extortionists the photos will be sent to their personal Internet contacts, neighbors and then broadcast throughout the world. Many apparently pay. Although it likely involves a small fraction of the victims, annually the FBI receives over 7000 such reports. The destructive broadcasts are invariably located in other countries and legally untouchable. This lucrative often robotic extortion victimizes a huge number of tormented young people. Mental health consequences and even suicides are probable, but it can't be quantified.

Sinister or unhinged broadcasters try to persuade and recruit followers to erratic or violent acts, sometimes in real-time. Following the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis youth-oriented messaging platforms fomented a riot within hours, destroying private property and burning down a police station.

So-called cyber bullying using the Internet has been of special concern to schools sometimes resulting in suicides involving especially vulnerable students who have been tormented. Many schools have adopted sensitive outreach policies for bullying reporting systems, some allowing anonymity, supporting students registering concerns about themselves or others. There are school posters available on this site encouraging students not to be silent when they are aware of risk or abuse. They are available for free download.

Every parent and guardian, as well as every school and educator are, and always have been, committed to protecting young people and helping them learn to thrive in safety. Now, that circle of responsibility must encompass the world of cyberspace and the Internet. Exactly what those approaches involve will depend upon the individual family, the school, and events, both local (a suicide) or globular (Covid-19).

Educating a young adult to understand mathematics, appreciate literature or teaching how to safely drive an

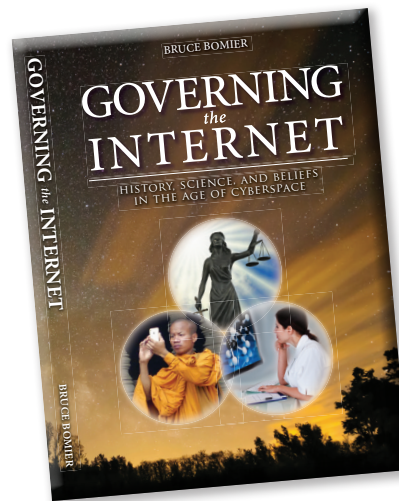
automobile or put romantic feelings in perspective has been a responsibility shared among schools, faith or other helping organizations and especially families. Now, how to realistically and safely approach the Internet becomes a similar and critical responsibility.

For over 50 years we have been sharing guidelines and providing support regarding youth health and safety. If a student, parent, teacher, school administrator or concerned person can provide input or insight regarding youth and the Internet please share your perspectives.

Discussing approaches and policies is valuable. We are facing this challenge together.

Thanks!

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What hath God wrought?

In 2020, prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, we published, *Governing the Internet*. It was a book exploring social and regulatory perspectives on the Internet. We approached understanding the Internet by reviewing past civilization changing advances in human communication and approaches towards social and regulatory controls. We look at the internet through the perspective of the human history of communications. The following are excerpts.

The book is available in some libraries, and you can order a copy through us which will include Post COVID-19 update. The update is important considering the Internet's pivotal role in both responsibly addressing and exacerbating the pandemic.

[Order *Governing the Internet* \(shipping included\)](#)

Excerpts from *Governing the Internet*

Perspectives on radically changing communications, historical and contemporary.

Tell others of the past that they may know what awaits them in the future.

—Confucius

The further backward you can look the further forward you are likely to see.

—Churchill

Many Things Have Changed

It's late at night or maybe early in the morning, and as you look out your window you notice that it's not really dark. The lights in your community never allow it to get truly dark anymore. Many things have changed.

You can see a few stars and you pick out the planet Venus, so it must be near morning. You glance at your neighbor's house and see a faint bluish glow in the upper bedroom window of their 15-year-old son. He's on his computer.



You're worried about him. You've watched him grow up and become a bright, polite, quiet young man. His mother has told you that he's troubled. He considers himself something of an athlete but he was too short to make the basketball team, so he was cut. It was heart-wrenching for him to say goodbye to his childhood teammates. He's too skinny for football and has developed acne. He's now self-conscious about facing anyone. The girl he secretly likes (perhaps in a way, loves) doesn't seem to know or care that he exists. He's far too shy or afraid to look at her, let alone approach her, especially now. He's ashamed and seriously unhappy with life.

In a way, your path was a bit similar when you were young, but now, with cyberspace surrounding this young

man, it's also different. He has options available of which you never dreamed. In a way, that unsettles you.

You might've talked to your worldly aunt, possibly the youth worker at your synagogue, or perhaps cryptically tried to get advice from your parents. You wouldn't dare tell anyone you knew everything. You might try to find something to read that would help guide you, but you wouldn't want to be seen taking certain things out at the library, even if you knew what to check out. As for the school counselor, you could never be seen going into his office, and you didn't have "that" serious a problem.

Of course, you had friends, but you couldn't open yourself up to them.

So, you put together bits and pieces of things you read, morality lessons from television programs (thank heaven for Star Trek), a little input from friends and relatives, and maybe a perspective or two from the synagogue or your bat mitzvah.

There was a lot of prolonged misery but, in the end, you survived. It involved time and some scarring. Deep down a certain sadness is with you still, but you pulled through.

What's that nice vulnerable neighbor boy doing? With who or what is he interacting in the sanctity of his bedroom as he electronically searches the universe for help and meaning?

It's barely possible he's cruising through the site put together by his church or school. He is far more likely to be interacting with either a cyber friend or being guided by a robot. If it's a living person, it could be an equally depressed housewife in rural Montana, or a McDonald's worker living in a tenement in New Jersey. It could be a young girl hiding under her bed covers in a room she shares with five siblings in Jakarta.

If it's a robot, he's really dealing with an unknown technology gal or guy, who perhaps years ago preprogrammed who or with what he will be interacting based upon a triggered algorithm. That mathematical formula would take into consideration his past searches, what he's purchased, the kinds of questions he's asked previously, and how many people of his probable age and gender visited which information streams for how long, in response to what questions. He will be principally directed in his search for guidance based on who paid how much money to the robot's owner.

The tech guys who built the robots won't have been trained in the helping professions and just may be a little odd themselves. They are good at detached statistics and quickly popping in place governing templates that will influence huge numbers of questioning, sometimes desperate, people. They have an amazing amount of control over human decision-making. They can influence how nations are ruled, which corporations or religions thrive or fail, and the future of your young neighbor.

The young man's mother read about pedophiles and sociopathic types trolling the Internet, who cynically push questioning or depressed young people into sex or suicide. Terrified, she purchased software to control her son's accessible content.

Like that would work.

She had to ask him to load the software and teach her how it could be monitored.

He will be moving into a different world, which in many ways will offer incredible advantages and opportunities, but which also may have an unanticipated darker side. His mother is concerned, and so are you.

Many things have changed.



20th Century Electronic Communications

On our 1-inch or 2.54 cm-per-thousand-years scale, the relative speed it took one-way, controlled, electronically-enhanced communications to spread throughout the world is about the height of two stacked coins.* It quickly institutionalized new mediums of human communication that expanded, enhanced, and destabilized our world.

From 1900 to the year 2000, much of modern human society leapt through scratchy radio and silent, jerky, black-and-white motion pictures at community movie houses, to 24/7 home delivered colorful dramas and dynamic real-time news and views. The way we communicate has changed and is accelerating at progressively greater speed.



Meet Sarah. She is an exceptionally smart 16-year-old woman living in rural America in 1915. Her world is the farmhouse built by her grandfather with a land grant he received for service to the Union during the Civil War. The farmhouse, its outbuildings and fields presently constitute pretty much the boundaries of her life.

She'll be expected to marry one of four or five young Lutheran men within a 30-mile radius of the farmstead, and to hold to the domestic life rhythms of never-ending labor and solitary farm wife service within her present world.

It won't happen.

In her one-room schoolhouse, she has excelled and has read just about every book in the little corner alcove that serves as the school library, reading many two or three times. Through those readings, supplemented by the local weekly newspaper and an occasional trip to the Carnegie-endowed library in the nearest big city of 1,000, she has come to understand that there are special things beyond the farmhouse's horizon. Just like wise and questioning women and men for thousands of generations before, Sarah is curious and wants to understand as much about the world as possible. She has sensed that a valuable and fascinating world beyond her present existence just might be available.

She is excited and anticipating something special. Her uncle, the owner of a successful local tack and hardware

store, has purchased tickets for her, her older sister and younger brother to hear a man named Limburg who will be speaking at the Lyceum. The Lyceum is a sort of a community open-air theater, covered by a canvas canopy and attached to the library in the really big town about 70 miles to the southeast. At the Lyceum, in warmer weather, they perform theatrical plays or concerts and sometimes have political debates. These are typically sponsored by the town or the Farmers Grange.

Mr. Limburg, however, is different. He visits the city once a year, bringing newspapers from all over the world, and for 2-1/2 hours, along with stereo-optic pictures he projects from a lantern, he will entertain and enthrall the people of the surrounding communities. In his enchanting voice, he will read excerpts he has selected from newspaper articles. Both important and sometimes humorous, the stories come from around the country and even around the world. He will tell those attending about not only the metropolises of New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, but also London and Paris, and even exotic and faraway cities in Asia, India and Africa. Sarah knows that there is a war in far-off Europe involving kings and emperors. Mr. Limburg will explain what's really happening.

With her mother's help, Sarah has carefully dyed her older sister's white confirmation dress, which is now hers, by slowly immersing it in coffee to give it a sophisticated tannish color. She is thoughtfully deciding how to wear her hair and if she should wear one or both of the two small pieces of jewelry she owns. She desperately wants to avoid seeming unsophisticated. She will be exposed to the real and fascinating greater world for 2-1/2 hours.

As she leaves, she turns to look at the farmhouse, and it crosses her consciousness that this place is only a small part of things much larger and far more complex—things with which she desperately wants to connect.

Time passes.

Sarah is 79, and now, in 1978, she is seriously concerned. She pushes a button on her new television remote control to see how Pres. Carter is doing with the proposed Panama Canal Treaty. She likes Pres. Carter, especially for his work in bringing Israeli Prime Minister Begin and Egyptian President Sadat together to attempt peace in the Middle East. She also knows the US dollar has plunged to a record low compared to the Japanese yen, and Pres. Carter is being blamed. She has listened

to and watched him carefully on television. She trusts him and will work for his re-election. She hopes he'll be successful.

As she spins through the television channels, she discovers that one of her favorite movies, "Annie Hall," produced by New Yorker Woody Allen, received an Academy award.

In a few days, the Dallas Cowboys will play the Denver Broncos in the Super Bowl, and her retired oral surgeon husband has invited a number of his friends and her brother over to watch. She'll need to drive to the grocery store and load up on Super Bowl supplies...beer and food. She smiles, remembering how once, while listening to a State University Football game at her uncle's store soon after he got a high-quality radio, he gave her and her brother a small can of exotic pineapple to share. It had come from faraway Hawaii. They felt so privileged. She decides that she will actually purchase a couple of fresh pineapples to cut up and serve at the Super Bowl party. It may be a little weird for the men, but her brother will remember.

En route, she also wants to stop by the mall with her granddaughter to buy a business suit to wear to the opening ceremony for the new audiovisual library addition. She's been on the library board for 35 years, and she's been invited to join the group cutting the official opening ceremonial ribbon. She trusts her granddaughter's judgment in stylish clothing and doesn't want to look unsophisticated.

"I'm thinking something tannish," she tells her granddaughter, "perhaps coffee colored."

**The "Governing the Internet" book profiles human history on a distance scale with 1-inch (2.54cm) equaling 1000 years. Sentient humans have been communicating with each other for 70+ feet but electronic communications, which dominate our contemporary world, reaches back less than an eighth of an inch.*

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Within only two generations, modern communications shifted from using a small copper wire to touch a crystal in the highest room of the house late at night to get faint, sporadic radio signals, to being engulfed in and bombarded with Technicolor news and stories, both live and prerecorded. We also have uncontrolled widespread information, often projecting a dark and sinister motive and outcome.

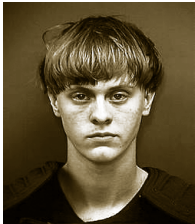
Trolling for Outliers

Our world is filled with lonely, troubled people. Today, many of them wander through cyberspace, riding their phones, tablets and laptops like erratic magic carpets into sometimes desperate social interaction. They are seeking connections and meaning. Sometimes, of course, this paradigm goes terribly wrong.

This (event) prompted me to type the words, “black on white crime” into Google and I have never been the same since that day.

Dylann Storm Roof
White Supremacist, Mass Murderer

Following the highly publicized shooting of an unarmed young Black man by a vigilante, another young man sought insight into what happened by wandering through cyberspace.



Dylann Storm Roof

Dylann Storm Roof was a 21-year-old White man, and clearly troubled. Alcohol, drugs, a dysfunctional family, and failure in almost everything he attempted had stamped his life. Neighbors reported that he would wander out of the house in the morning, sit on the curb staring into

space and then, after a few hours, move to a different curb for the rest of the day. He was a blank slate waiting to be written upon.

One day, alone in the solitude of his bedroom, he opened his “cyberspace intimate,” a computer, laptop, tablet, or phone, and asked about Blacks and crime. Cyberspace robots seamlessly carried him to the racially charged website of the Council of Conservative Citizens—the CCC.

He read story after story, spun and hyped involving ghastly crimes committed by Black criminals against innocent White victims. First, he was shocked as he

read stories of abuse, then he engaged in frank Internet discussions with his new friends. Finally, he embraced this cyber entity as a brother in arms. Interestingly, his new White supremacist cyberspace colleagues may have been flesh and blood humans or responsive robotic algorithms—most likely a combination. Who or whatever it was, it had recruited a convert, soldier, and eventually a martyr. His new cyberspace intimates pleaded with him to avenge and protect abused, vulnerable, and endangered members of his threatened White race.

He answered the call.

Soon after his electronic epiphany, on June 17, 2015, he entered a historically prominent Black church in the Low Country of South Carolina. He pulled out a revolver and brutally murdered nine—the Senior Pastor and eight other worshipers. He had no remorse and, even facing life imprisonment or possibly the death penalty, he was steadfast and unrepentant.

No racially charged brochure or ranting guy sitting next to him at a bar could likely have touched him in such a calculated and personalized manner. In his empty life, the targeted, seemingly personal cyberspace interactions symbolically and cynically filled the void. The governing symbols in his life re-converged in a pre-programmed rhythm anticipated by those on the other side of the computer screen or programmed algorithm. Innocent people were murdered, unquestionably using the Internet as a weapon.

Similarly, in October of 2018, a 46-year-old Internet-radicalized truck driver, Robert Bowers, expressed his cyber-supported, anti-Semitic commitment by barging into a Pittsburgh synagogue and gunning down 11 Jewish worshipers.

Targeted communications prowl through the world of cyberspace, typically for economic advantage, but sometimes for philosophic converts. Cyberspace has shown an unnerving ability to create an intimacy, most ominously among the lonely and socially vulnerable, promoting the targeting of “others.”

Of course, cyberspace is not inherently good or evil. Converts to responsible social causes, whether involving the environment or caring for those in need, emerge in a steady altruistic stream from cyberspace. The trolling misanthrope is the outlier—yet, they are real and they are a threat. The take-away is that there is a new force “out

there” which needs to be understood because its power is transformative; it can provide value and enlighten, or become degrading and dangerous.

Whether it is a crafted appeal to do violence, a heartfelt appeal to help others, an appeal toward bigotry and divisiveness, or a sincere or cynical sales pitch, the medium of cyberspace carries with it specialized power to target and penetrate. It can get personal and realign symbolic convergences through a sort of cyber intimacy. Like no other medium of communication, it can touch hearts and minds en masse, or become personally responsive to a target audience. It will mold individuals, societies, and our future. Our foundational beliefs will probably most influence which paths we take regarding controls. Yet, those beliefs will also be impacted.

* * *

Governance in Cyberspace

Humans maintain mechanisms to influence social/cultural conduct. Propositions of belief, modified by symbolic convergences, form the basis for what actions or things wind up being promoted, allowed or condemned.

There are two anchor limitations regarding social controls in times of dramatic changes in human communication mediums:

First, we cannot anticipate future problems with accuracy. As Gutenberg was printing his beautiful Bibles, how could he have anticipated that his wondrous printing machine would feed the flames for generations of religious holocaust throughout Christendom? Could Marconi or Tesla have anticipated what Hitler would do with their radio? We don't really know where cyberspace will take us in reshuffling how humanity makes use of its new powers.

Secondly, the control mechanisms we presently use may not be effective in dealing with cyberspace challenges. Many of the elements of cyberspace have no similarity to past and present things and actions.

With those limitations in mind, the following are the patterns traditionally used by cultures, societies, and governments to control human actions:

- 1. Create internal pride**
- 2. Receive tangible support, typically in the form of status and/or wealth**
- 3. Experience general goodwill**
- 4. Avoid interference—left alone**
- 5. Experience general bad will**
- 6. Be the subject of ostracism and stigma**
- 7. Experience formal pressure to amend conduct**
- 8. Be quarantined or formally prohibited from specified conduct**
- 9. Be subjected to legal civil and/or criminal sanctions**
- 10. Create internal shame**

The above often overlap and, among different cultures or even within the same culture, can inspire differing reactions. They are the social tools that humanity uses to inspire, prohibit, and generally control conduct. At present, in different formats, they are the control options we have available.

They will likely all connect to the social and regulatory controls of internet use.

The key is how?