Changing Technology Changes Society: How the Amplification of Peer Pressure Challenges the Rule of Law

BY JESSE HIRSH

One of the tendencies I've observed since going online in the early nineties has been the general support and sympathy towards libertarianism, and the conception of cyberspace as a lawless frontier. It seems no matter how many court cases and enacted legislation extend their influence into the online world, the myth of total liberty is pervasive and resilient, especially in the hands of youth who always feel a sense of entitlement when inhabiting their online worlds.

For a while I tried to connect this outlaw culture to the rule of lawlessness as described by critics of U.S. foreign policy like I.F. Stone and Noam Chomsky. If the elite of society (drunk driving celebrities), captains of industries (Enron and Conrad the convict), and rulers of regimes (Bush, Putin, etc), flagrantly flout the laws of the land, why then should the people be expected to obey them? Further the inhabitants of this self-described new frontier can't help but embrace a perceived manifest destiny that all that is old is to be discarded to make way for anything that is new.

However the recent boom of online social networks like Facebook and MySpace have helped me to fully understand what is happening by providing so many conflicts and such clear expressions of what is actually

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happening, which is the amplification of peer pressure at the expense of the rule of law.

Peer pressure, a social force that has existed for as long as society, is now amplified by social media technology in particular, and by the Internet in general. We're seeing the impacts of this amplification when it comes to bullying, cheating, privacy, file sharing, and the speed at which society, but youth culture in particular, continues to change.

Bullying for example is a phenomena that has been transformed by the power of amplification from being a nuisance that is considered a part of childhood to a genuine threat that can snowball to devastate an individual's life, regardless of their age. The speed by which virtual lynch mobs can form online lends itself to the abil-

ity of the bully to be part of a larger group, a contrast to the traditional image of the lone bully terrorizing the school yard.

Cheating similarly benefits from the potential to scale online, with the typical study group that in the physical world is limited to half a dozen, in an online environment can grow into the hundreds, or even thousands. The risk in such situations is the ease by which collaboration can become cheating, with the difference often being in the eye of the beholder.

For example in a much cited dispute at Ryerson University, a student was charged with hosting a Facebook group that allowed students to collaborate on homework that was supposed to be completed independently. While the rules of the university said one thing, the students involved believed another, in their case the peer pressure taking precedence over the school regulations.

File sharing is similar, in that those who actively share movies, music, and software online regard their culture as either an innovation in the distribution of content or even further as a type of civil disobedience in the face of draconian copyright laws and technologies of content control. People who are not part of that file sharing culture however tend to regard those who download such media as being thieves, as they believe, and in many countries the law supports this view, that passing around these files

online is akin to stealing from the creators of said media.

Yet even in the face of multi-million dollar campaigns trying to convince file sharers that they are breaking the law, their numbers continue to grow, and those who obtain their media in this manner continue to become galvanized and evangelical about this emerging form of content distribution. Another clear example of how peer pressure, combined with amplifying technology, allows people to have the confidence and culture to defy the law.

Unfortunately privacy is another area in which the law is superceded by amplified peer pressure, and often this irreversible process is regretted after the fact by people who initially discarded it due to a belief that it is what their peers desired. We've all witnessed the impulse to share your life online as a means of meeting new friends, however there comes a point where a line is crossed, and too much information is disclosed.

For many young people this impacts their ability to get a job, as well as their school work, as employers and school administrators alike are able to see what used to be a personal side of their lives. The illusion fostered by amplified peer pressure is the belief that these online spaces are secure (when of course they are not) or that the rules that govern normal society do not apply to these online social spaces (which of course they do).

Thus the real problem here is speed, as the rule of law is based on due process and taking the time to protect rights, whereas the amplification of peer pressure results in an accelerated culture where little time is taken to reflect or think before acting, and often regret and remorse are all that is left in the face of actions taken to be part of the group. No longer are we as a society able to take the time to decide our social direction, but instead are forced to react and respond to ongoing conflicts that result from different peer sets developing contradictory and opposing cultures.

A simplistic yet accurate way to summarize this transformation would be to say it's part of the larger shift from a written culture to an oral society in which the tribal tendencies have greater influence than the printed laws. However I prefer evoking the image and power of peer pressure as it suggests the key is with our friends, as well as the lessons we originally learned to resist their general influence on our lives with regard to the development of our individual identities.

Sites like Facebook and other online tools allow our social networks to become explicit, and when their activities and tendencies are mapped out over time, the dynamics and influence of particular individuals becomes clear. Perhaps as we continue to move forward in this type of online social space we will also

develop the language and culture necessary to engage in a form of social governance when it comes to our peer formations.

It helps to recognize which of our friends has the greatest influence not just on ourselves, but on our communities at large. Similarly it helps to understand how rumours spread and how attitudes develop so as to have a greater impact on which ones in particular take root and from that make larger decisions on who we want to be friends with.

For educators and institutions it's about establishing channels of dialogue that allow them to have access to the various attitudes that the peer groups in their domain possess, and over time attempting to influence these dynamics in ways that help introduce democratic and critical discourses so as to foster a socially just and fair culture.

It's not easy, given the speed by which our society is changing, yet now more than ever we need to understand how peer pressure as a social dynamic is having an increasingly important role in the way our world behaves and responds.

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The New Online Omnivores

BY CRAWFORD KILIAN

We teachers must adapt to our wireless students

I really need to get out more.

For the first time in a long time, I recently drove clear across Vancouver. I was on my way to attend Northern Voice 2008, a bloggers' conference held at the University of British Columbia.

It made me realize that even after years of blogging, I haven't met many bloggers face to face. I certainly did at the conference, and a very likable and attractive mob they were.

More importantly, that face-to-face encounter taught me something about a problem that post-secondary educators are confronting: the role of the computer in the face-to-face classroom.

At Capilano College, we faculty are increasingly annoyed by students with laptops. Supposedly, they're taking notes. In reality they're, um, multi-tasking: vaguely listening to the teacher's lecture, while focusing on some new YouTube upload or a heavy-breathing e-mail from their sweetie.

Shut those laptops!

Many of us have simply decreed that laptops be closed during class. In some of my classes, however, the addiction is so strong that I have to repeat the decree two or three times during class.

And it really is an addiction. When I call a break, the laptops pop open, or the cellphones come out. It's like teaching in a crack house.

This is not entirely healthy. But we are now dealing with students who have no memory of a pre-web world. They live in the web, though they're often shockingly ignorant of how to navigate it for serious purposes.

We faculty are as addicted as our wretched students. Walk around our offices at lunchtime and you'll see us chowing down at our desks while blankly staring at one website after another.

Avenue for learning

This is as bad for teachers as for students. I remember my first year in college teaching back in 1967-68. That's when I learned my trade in a faculty lunchroom

over awful fish and chips. The older teachers taught us young dopes how to teach, and why it mattered. Nothing like that venue exists today.

But when I walked into my first conference at Northern Voice, I realized I was in a venue a lot like that lunchroom.

It was a big lecture theatre in UBC's Forestry Building, with some web guru holding forth in front of rows of terraced seats. A web page was projected on a screen behind him. In the seats, scores were listening . . . almost all with laptops in front of them.

Standing at the top of the theatre, I could see that they were logged in to all kinds of different sites, not many obviously related to the site the speaker was discussing. But they were engaged, clearly listening to the speaker while exploring other sites.

Moving into another lecture theatre, I saw a speaker who'd put words all over a chalkboard while his dozens of listeners hunched over their Macs and PCs.

Online, and on task

But they weren't off in some other world. They were listening, responding to the speaker's questions, and commenting whether or not the speaker pointed to those with their hands raised.

Most post-secondary teachers would kill for students like these: smart, articulate, funny and eager to learn more.

When I said my piece as a panelist in another session, the first thing I told our audience was that they looked like the future of education.

Here's why. The web in 15 short years has become an inescapable reality. We can't even get our students to schlep across the quad to explore the print resources of our pretty good library. We ourselves can't do our jobs any more without the web. When the college loses its Internet connection, it's like losing water or power. We might as well all go home.

But we faculty still think of teaching and learning as a face-to-face encounter between a standing instructor and a bunch of seated students, making notes of what the instructor says and writes on the chalkboard. This is simply not what our students are doing anymore.

Students in orbit

They are moving around and among the teacher's words, like asteroids orbiting the sun under the tug of the planets. These conflicting pulls sometimes speed them up, sometimes slow them down. In extreme cases, some passing force may fling them right out of the course, or even the school.

We'd be foolish to blame our students or their damn laptops for this state of affairs. We might wish they were dutiful note-takers, scrawling with ballpoint pens in their binders the way we did.

But they're not. We don't do them, or ourselves, any good by trying to give them a first-rate 1960s education.

It's equally idle to assume we can send our students home to gain their educations entirely online. I've spent more than a decade finding out the hard way that online learning works only for the self-propelled and the desperate. For the vast majority, the face-to-face encounter with a teacher is critical.

Perhaps it's because young men always gathered around the most experienced hunters or warriors before going into action. The young women did the same with their grandmothers. You didn't just learn how to kill an antelope or bear a child; you learned who you were and what tribe you belonged to.

Facing a new kind of beast

My face-to-face encounters at Northern Voice taught me that educators are like old hunters facing a new kind of animal: If we're going to do the kids any good, we have to learn the nature of the new beast, drawing not just on our experience but on our own ability to learn.

This is a hell of a challenge for a profession as pathologically conservative as post-secondary education. We teach as we were taught, and following the rules got us our degrees and tenure. Unless we lecture in the nude, we're unfirable. So why should

we trouble ourselves to learn a new style of teaching?

I could cite any number of solemn political and pedagogical reasons, but my fellow-panelist Meg Tilly had a better one. Telling us how she created her first blog post, she described her reaction: "Hey, this is *fun*!"

And teaching should always be fun, no matter how dull or arcane the subject. Nothing is dull if taught right, and the brain finds nothing arcane if it's got the neurons to deal with it.

If I'm reading my students right, the new beast of online knowledge will be hunted collectively, not individually. Face-to-face or online, students will work in teams to master some skill or body of knowledge.

They'll learn as much from each other as from their teachers. It won't matter what they've personally memorized, as long as they've memorized where to look for what they need, and how to judge it when they've found it.

A college or university with a student population like the bloggers at Northern Voice won't come out of nowhere. From kindergarten to high school, educators are going to have to get serious about that old cliché, "learning how to learn." And we ourselves will have to learn how to learn, or get out of the business.

We can't hold on to the bicycle seat forever while we tell the kid where to go. At some point we have let her go where she wants

to — and let her also learn from her bruises when she falls over.

Our students are telling us that they're eager to start exploring this amazing world Sir Tim Berners-Lee has given us. We'd better show an equal eagerness, or they'll leave us behind.

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Footprints, Fingerprints and Full Body Scans; Leaving our Tracks in an Electronic World

BY MARITA MOLL

It was Saturday morning and a brief stop at a local garage sale had netted an artist's portfolio case for one dollar. The case, it turned out, contained remnants from a children's art exhibit held a decade ago. The drawings on citizenship and belonging were joyful, optimistic and almost achingly pre-9/11 in tone. "We all matter!" "Canadian kids of Canada. Be who you are!" "Just because we're different doesn't mean we can't be friends." "Canada rules, baby!" Unfortunately the drawings were still tagged with names, ages, grade levels, schools and in some cases, teachers, telephone numbers and parental release forms. Suddenly, it felt like more than a looney's worth of trouble.

Having worked as an educational researcher for many years, I know that privacy legislation with respect to children is very rigorous. Personal information can only be released for a "consistent purpose" — that is, "a use that the individual to whom the information relates might reasonably have expected to take place".

Teachers and principals are highly conscious of staying on the right side of this responsibility which sometimes leaves them in awkward privacy quandaries. Does a consistent purpose include assigning names to the coat hooks in the hallway to the kindergarten class or sending home a class list before Valentine's day?

"Lighten up," said my family. "It was a garage sale — a modern day treasure hunt in which finders are keepers and no taxes apply. Ditch the drawings and get over it!" I guess I can do that, but I'm still left with a lot of questions and a feeling that I am sweeping a much bigger issue under the rug.

You have zero privacy

Back in 1999, Scott McNeely, then CEO of Sun Microsystems made the controversial remark to a group of reporters that "You have zero privacy anyway. Get over it." (Sprenger, 1999). Consumer groups were irate. But it looks like he was right. Existing legislation notwithstanding, privacy has become the

first casualty of the information age and, despite occasional apprehensions, we all seem to be

Users have completely failed to think about rights to their information — and have thereby ceded these rights to the applications and their owners.

merrily following along behind that particular pied piper.

I registered for Gmail, Google's popular free e-mail service, and stopped to read their conditions instead of just clicking through them. Taking the kitchen sink approach, Google reserves "a perpetual, irrevocable, worldwide, royalty-free and non-exclusive license to reproduce, adapt, modify, translate, publish, publicly perform, publicly display and distribute any content which you submit, post or display on or through, the services"?

Now, why does anyone agree to that? It is not different from agreeing to let Bell Canada tape all of your telephone conversations or let Canada Post keep copies of all your letter mail to use at their leisure forever. But if it had been possible and cheap to keep such copies in the early days of these technologies, would laws against wiretapping or opening personal mail exist today? The answer appears to be no. Storage and retrieval is cheap and easy for Internet search engines like

Google, so perpetual storage has become the default. As a result, users have completely failed to think about rights to their information — and have thereby ceded these rights to the applications and their owners.

Reputation defenders to the rescue

Search engines have only been around for a few years. But we've completely bought into the fact that they deliver almost anything ever said online, to whoever asks for it, with no expiry dates or other limitations. Have you ever indulged in an online rant about your teacher, school, or employer? Your early indiscretion can forever keep popping up at the top of the list as though it happened yesterday. It can take on a completely different light when read by the personnel manager at the company where you just applied for a job. Michael Fertik, CEO of reputationdefender.com, calls the Internet a "global tattooing machine." He's making a living tracking down these embarrassing tattoos and negotiating with sites to have them deleted. It's definitely a growth industry.

I was recently asked, by a business acquaintance, if I would add my name to her professional network on a system called LinkedIn. Out of curiosity, I clicked on the link and took a look around. Looks like an online rolodex, I thought. Within a week

of adding my name, I began to get invitations from other people I knew, and hardly knew, to become part of their professional networks. I quickly reconsidered my desire to be part of a global interconnected online rolodex and decided that my old manual one still worked fine.

I have carefully avoided signing up to the popular social networking spaces — Facebook and MySpace — where people have virtual rooms complete with pictures, music and favorite wallpaper, where friends drop in leaving greetings, invitations and notes on your public message board. This has changed the way young people socialize. Where they once hung out in the park, they now hang out online. Unfortunately the chat and activity is not necessarily more discrete despite the fact that many more people are likely to be eavesdropping.

Some users have discovered there is a big price to pay for letting it all hang out online. A warrant would be required if you wanted to eavesdrop on a telephone conversation, but there are not such rules on the Internet. Eleven students in a high school north of Toronto were suspended for posting negative comments about their principal on Facebook. A Ryerson student was reprimanded and threatened with expulsion for setting up a Chemistry study group which the administration considered an exercise in cheating. A Manitoba student has been charged for impersonating a teacher on Facebook. The list of social networking users who find themselves in the traditional media for online indiscretions continues to grow.

An Ottawa grocery chain recently fired employees because of postings they made on Facebook, postings which the employees said were meant to be a joke. But there's no wink, wink, nudge, nudge on the Internet. What you posted can stick to you for a very long time. Recent statistics suggest that 1/3 to 1/2 of all employers in the U.S. are known to check search engines and social networking spaces for information on potential job candidates — lots of potential business for Mr. Fertik and others who take up the mantle of defending our reputation online.

Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?

My new laptop came with a built-in fingerprint reader — a fancy security feature that allows me to use my fingerprint to start up the computer. Since I don't work for a security agency or keep any state secrets on my computer, I can choose to ignore this feature. But watch out, biometric security measures you won't be able to ignore will soon be coming to a wallet in your pocket. Britain, one of the most advanced surveillance societies in the world, has, for the time being, dropped the iris scans from its proposed National

Identity Register. But it still plans to collect all 10 fingerprints and facial scans of persons over 16 applying for a passport from 2011/12 on. Plans for ID cards linked to this information were put on hold after computer disks holding the personal details of all families in the UK with a child under sixteen went missing in November 2007 (BBC, 2008). "Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?" you might ask — Who will watch the watchers?

In 2006, Minister of Public Safety, Stockwell Day, suggested that a national biometric ID card was inevitable (Canadian Press, 2006). Observers warn that, to manage the expense, such a card could slowly replace other cards now in your wallet — social security, health insurance and drivers license, to begin with. Privacy experts call this "function creep." Such systems are just waiting in the wings to be rolled out when the next wave of fear about public security hits us. But privacy experts warn that the security we buy this way may never be worth the protection inherent in diversified identity mechanisms — i.e. keeping all this information in discrete databases (rather like not putting all your eggs in one basket).

At a recent international conference on Computers, Freedom and Privacy held in Montreal, Privacy International gave out the annual "Big Brother" awards for the best examples of privacy infringement. The top award went to the "common good" in whose name the worst privacy violations are perpetrated — x-ray body screening at airports, for example. Most people are disturbed by the idea of being virtually stripped naked walking through an airport screening device. But one presenter at this conference, a member of the transexual community, gave a chilling description of the problems x-ray body screening presented for a woman with a penis. It is from the perspective of the most vulnerable that we see the real danger of such intrusiveness.

The 2007 International Conference of Data Protection and Privacy Commissioners, also held in Montreal, was appropriately called Terra Incognita — alluding to the unknown territory we are now discovering in the privacy arena. If you have no problem with your physical body being electronically stripped naked, how would you feel about an electronically stripped brain? I don't know what a brain scan is in this context, but it is one of the new privacy invading technologies mentioned on the conference home page, along with something called "smart dust". It seems that ignoring the vulnerability of others will only lead to yet another technology that threatens to close in on our own vulnerabilities. We all have a tolerance limit for invasion of personal space.

Privacy is a social issue
The recent film "Good Night, and

Good Luck" was a reminder that a government caught up in a paranoid frenzy about a threat to national security, real or perceived, can combine tidbits of information in ways that could never have been imagined. It didn't take any modern technologies to destroy the reputations of the many victims of the House Committee on Un-American Activities in the 1950's. It is hard to exaggerate the potential of the current technologies in the hands of McCarthy think-alikes.

So, tomorrow, as you wander the streets of the web, leaving your virtual footprints, fingerprints and brain scans wherever you go, remember that, technically, there is literally no limit to the amount of information that can and is being collected about us. There is also no reason why that can't change. Privacy is a social not a technical issue. Until citizens take the initiative and demand rules around data collection, retrieval and retention, and put the brakes on intrusive technologies with questionable security benefits, we will be completely at the mercy of the unintended consequences of the technologies we have invented.

As for the childrens' artwork, at least that small privacy wrong has been righted. Sadly, but dutifully, we destroyed it.

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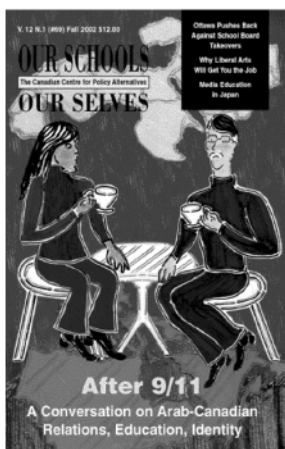
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A message from Ontario's public high school teachers and educational workers

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