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# How the Georgetown Community Views the Internet: A Three Module Wiki-based Survey in Early 2008

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In February and March 2008, the three Yahoo! Fellows Irene Wu and Junior Yahoo! Fellows Steve Leu, and Liza Chuykova ran a series of online discussions targeting the Georgetown University community on subjects related to technology, values, and international politics. This paper is a brief account of the purpose and methods used in this project, which may be useful to others at Georgetown interested in similar ventures or future Yahoo! Fellows.

## I Main Objectives

As part of the Yahoo! Fellowship, the modules were an opportunity to engage a broad range of Georgetown students on issues related to technology. As fellowship funds were limited, outreach opportunities were few. This was a low cost way of reaching a group of interested students.

Irene was curious about the views of students on a handful of subjects related to the Internet—the authoritativeness of sites like Wikipedia, their sense of their on-line and in-person personas, whether they were concerned about their personal information being collected and available to others. The modules provided some insight into the current student attitude on these questions.

Irene was starting the study of a wiki designed to help a humanitarian crisis, a major tsunami which hit Southeast and South Asia in December 2004. Having the opportunity to manage a wiki herself gave Irene some insight useful to this parallel research project.

It was important, as well, to develop a project in which the Junior Yahoo! Fellows worked with software applications in a manner that allowed them to engage thoughtfully on issues related to the technology. Also, the wiki gave them an opportunity to interact with the Georgetown community in their capacity as Yahoo! Fellows.

## II

# Process and Methods

In January, Irene drafted up three sets of module questions. The reason for running a series of three modules was the hope that an audience would build over the course of the series. Each module would be nominally available for input for a fixed period of ten days; in practice each module stayed open to editing until the end of the series.

With the support of the university, the beginning of each module was announced on an email sent university wide to students, faculty and staff. For the second and third modules, the announcement email included a brief summary of the previous module and a “thank you” note to the participants by name. The purpose was to encourage those who knew the participants to look at the previous module and perhaps encourage them to participate in the next.

The technology used for the modules was pbwiki (<http://www.pbwiki.com>), a popular, free wiki tool. Steve experimented with Georgetown’s in-house wiki technology, but chose pbwiki for its simplicity. The university’s application had access controls which made it harder to get started quickly.

The password/invite key for the wiki was in the university-wide email and was posted on the home page of the wiki itself. In practice, anyone surfing the Internet would have been able to open the wiki and provide input.

In setting up each module, Steve, Liza and Irene would approach friends and colleagues with the module questions, and collect their comments in writing. These starter comments were posted to the wiki by the fellows manually at the same time as the module questions themselves. The purpose behind the starter comments was to establish a posting style on the page for others to follow. Irene was also concerned that many would be reluctant to be the first person to post a comment.

# III

## Discussion

### **Module 1: Trust, Internet and Institutions**

(February 4–14, 2008)

This module addressed the question of how authoritative is information on the Internet, particularly asking the question whether Wikipedia was a sufficiently authoritative reference for school term papers. In general, the view was that Wikipedia was insufficiently authoritative, although the same commenters said they often use Wikipedia. A minority of commenters believed Wikipedia is an excellent information source. One commenter regarded the anonymous quality of Wikipedia's articles as making it less authoritative.

### **Module 2: Identity and Internet**

(February 18–28, 2008)

This module tried to get at questions of how people feel being online, particularly whether they are more themselves in-person or on-line. Participants were evenly split, some were more comfortable revealing themselves online, others in-person, others felt there were the same in both instances. In terms of online links, many acknowledged the importance of using technology to maintain personal ties, a few had friendships that were entirely on-line. Others emphasized that factors other than technology were more important in bringing people together—language, citizenship, common interests, culture. Interestingly, 10 out of the 18 comments on this module were anonymous, far more than in the other two modules.

### **Module 3: Information, Technology, and Power**

(March 10–20, 2008)

This module asked questions about the power accumulated by companies, the government, and other individuals through collecting personal information about other people online. A lot of commenters were comfortable with businesses collecting information on their own customers; once people decided to become customers, then consent was implied. There were mixed views on government collection of information, an acknowledgement it was happening but a discomfort with it. There was a divergence of views on the relatively new capacity

of individuals to look up information on other individuals. Many used the Internet to keep up with friends and colleagues, not always in a friendly way. Others found this capacity useful professionally.

Finally, on April 9, the fellows held a debriefing session, open to all members of the Georgetown community, to discuss the three modules and the work behind creating them. Two faculty participated, no students came.



## IV Results

### Participation

On the whole, there tended to be more starter comments rounded up by Steve, Liza, and Irene, than comments posted directly to the wiki by participants. For Irene, there were some starter comments which Irene collected on paper; in other instances, Irene persuaded people to post comments directly to the wiki. In most of the later instances, the experience was new for the participants.

Liza noted that although students were generally enthusiastic to participate in the modules, they seemed to be uncomfortable putting their names under their comments as soon as they learned that the responses would be posted online. An attempt to persuade them that the data was only collected for research purposes and the wiki itself was supported by a credible institution (the one that most of the participants are currently associated with) did not yield results—the majority of respondent still preferred to remain anonymous. Especially for Module 2, some participants were obviously struggling to identify whether they feel more comfortable online or in person, asking additional clarification questions, which demonstrates that internet-based channels have become a natural medium of communication that are instantly shaping our personalities without us noticing their effects.

Liza also found that most participants inquired in detail about the larger research topic for which their responses were collected and wanted to know who was involved, how it was funded and what the outcome would be. This was an indication that people were very mindful about why they should spend their time contributing to the wiki. In a time when we as customers, citizens and passers-by in the street are constantly asked to provide information/share thoughts on different subjects, people become increasingly wary and often reluctant to allocate their time for additional surveys.

Steve notes there was not a large enough sample size to determine if there were distinct patterns among commenters who wrote their answers on paper versus those who posted directly to the website. As mentioned, the paper comments were collected in-person by the fellows; these commenters had no awareness of others' comments. This had the benefit of soliciting unbiased answers. Interestingly, for modules 1 and 3 comments were more similar, no matter whether submit-

ted on paper or directly posted to the wiki. Module 2 comments were more divided. The downside to paper answers was that many of the commenters were not actively engaged in the discussion post-contribution, since they had not visited the site. It was a trade-off, and, in hindsight, given the low activity level for users posting to the site voluntarily, it was a necessity.

### **Interactivity on-line**

One of the distinguishing characteristics of an open wiki is that there is opportunity for creators and participants to interact with each other, in dialogue fashion and in direct editing of each others' texts. In the course of the three modules, there were a few signs of such creative interaction:

- a. One comment from Professor Pilch criticized the use of the word "cite" to refer to Wikipedia, suggesting that the appropriate term should be "site". A response came from another participant pointing out that "cite" was a shortened version of "citation" and could be appropriately used when referring to Wikipedia as a reference.
- b. One colleague of Irene's at the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy Jim DeHart modified Irene's comments. He did not previously ask Irene permission to modify her comments. However, after modifying her comments, he added a parenthetical note on the wiki indicating he had altered their original sense.
- c. One student of Irene's, Serge Aluker modified the questions on module 1 and also issued a challenge to other participants to alter his own comments.
- d. Steve noted one incidence of apparent vandalism. An excerpt from a term paper on a completely unrelated subject was posted to the wiki. Steve removed this from the wiki.

With the exception of the apparent vandalism attempt, Irene regarded all interactive use of the wiki as positive. With blogs, for example, authorship is clear, and there is the deliberate pace and exchange of a dialogue. However, for wikis, the creativity of the application is the utter openness of the site to editing. Irene was somewhat surprised more interaction did not occur.

In retrospect, Steve notes the technology used for this experiment may have impeded more contribution. Using a wiki (as well as a wiki tool with a non-Georgetown domain) for a running dialogue on Internet issues may have been too open-ended for the Georgetown community. It came up in the April debriefing that this may have given the

impression that the work was not legitimate, academic group. Another observation raised at the debriefing was that the openness of the wiki, especially the power to modify any comment could have dissuaded potential commenters from contributing.

### **Appendix**

The modules and comments as they appeared on the wiki are included in the Appendix. The original modules as posted were open to comment and change by the participants; also comments as posted could be modified by the original authors and by other participants. The appendix shows a snapshot of all modules and comments at the end of the entire series in April 2008.

## Appendix

### The Modules

#### Mini-Module 1—Trust, Internet and Institutions (February 4–14, 2008)

**Is Wikipedia an authoritative source when you write your term papers? Your ~~professors~~ parents have probably told you no (if any of you profs have said OK, let us know!). Why?**

**One thing technology does is give some competition to the old institutions we ~~trust~~ rely on. Is Wikipedia more accurate than the Encyclopedia Britannica? Why? Because it is ~~printed on paper~~ on the internet, or because ~~experts~~ tens of thousands of people collectively put it together?**

**Let's ~~look at~~ read the news. Where do you get your news? Do you rely more on news from organizations with newspapers and TV stations? Or do you rely on sources which are purely online? If bloggers are like Wikipedia, are traditional TV and print journalists like the Encyclopedia Britannica?**

**Why don't we bring in the economists? What's the best way to get a price on a curious item—a set of old carved bookshelves, for example. Is it on e-Bay where millions of people can tell you what they would pay for it? Or is it a handful of skilled appraisers? Could you apply the same principle to other kinds of questions—what's the best approach to health care policy, or where the put traffic lights in a city?**

**Why do we trust the collective wisdom of the masses in some instances, but in other instances we do not?**

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I do not use Wikipedia as an authoritative source but that does not diminish the importance it has to me as a research tool. I use it initially to get an overview on a topic. If I need more concrete or elaborate data or research, then I will follow the links cited in the article. I would never reference Wikipedia in a paper, at least in its current state. I could see it eventually including validated primary sources, much like the major encyclopediae have. But Wikipedia's flexibility, ability to

update itself quickly, and indeed even its occasional informality are key qualities I look for in my research.

Wikipedia is more accurate than Encyclopedia Britannica but maybe not as precise. Entries in the encyclopediae are precise, carefully edited and composed and stripped of extra content. But Wikipedia in its verbosity contains more nuance, more relevant social meaning, varieties of sources and interpretations, and recent links to other data, that an encyclopedia by the nature of its editing just can't compete with.

I get my news from primary sources, whether that means investigative journalism from the New York Times or Washington Post or embedded journalism from bloggers like Michael Yon and McClatchy's dispatches. I read headlines off the major news wires and from The Economist but prefer to get insight from those who are directly involved in a situation instead. I read blogs as a filter for the many interesting articles that come out each day (otherwise I would not be able to scan all the news sources myself) and sometimes I'll read my trusted bloggers for commentary on a story. Each source has its own utility -- you can't rely on just one these days.

The more liquidity there is in a market, the more accurate the price will end up being, and the smaller the spread will be between buyers and sellers. There is a wisdom of crowds that can react faster than a handful of experts and appraisers can in evaluating the worth of something. This also negates the appeal of collusion or withholding information.

You can apply the same principle to other questions -- open Internet polling, direct democratic voting systems online. The question of where to put traffic lights in a city would best be answered with geospatial data combined with observed traffic results -- this sort of decision should rely on technical data and not the wisdom of crowds because it's not based on a value judgment.

**Ben Turner, MSFS '09**

What's with the focus on professors accepting Wikipedia as a source? How about your employer? Or your mother? I've cited many things from Wikipedia in arguments with my classmates, and it seems to go over pretty well. I've used Wikipedia in cases I've presented at work, and everyone seems to buy it. However, I once cited an Economist article that explains in elegant and refined style why it's a waste of time to learn Chinese ([http://www.economist.com/world/britain/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=10180807](http://www.economist.com/world/britain/displaystory.cfm?story_id=10180807)) in an discussion with a professor of the Chinese language, and the professor told me I can't cite such

ridiculous crap in her classroom. I don't think there is something overtly special in the Wikipedia-Professor relationship that merits a discussion on "global values" (incidentally, a discussion on what the heck that means might be interesting). We can talk about epistemology at large, but a discussion about the authoritativeness of any particular source seems to me to miss the point. If you are reading this, then please change it. Seriously, please do change it. Otherwise, what's the point of my having written it? And just so you don't feel odd about writing in this space when someone else's name is signed below, I'll remove my name. . . . Well, I am very upset that no one changed what I wrote.

- 1) I consider Wikipedia a collection of both authoritative and non-authoritative sources. So, given that one actually looks down below at the source of the info and even cite checks, yes, Wikipedia can be an authoritative source for term papers.
- 2) I would say Wikipedia is more current, which can make it more accurate in that sense, but not necessarily more accurate when considering the facts themselves.
- 3) I get my news from respected newspapers (e.g. Washington Post), but online. I do not rely on wikis for news and don't consider blogs reliable sources of news, although this distrust is mainly because of their tilt and targeted journalism (i.e. preaching to the choir).
- 4) I actually think eBay does say a lot about price and value. Appraisers seem to serve a select few. For the masses, it's all about what people would pay. You should not, however, apply this principle to questions that require knowledge (because the general public is unfortunately quite . . . . stupid).
- 5) I have yet to figure this out. Good question.

**Mathew Cahill, MSFS'09**

1) No, but it gives people a general idea about different topics (news, history, places . . . .) and from there you can move on to other sources. I don't think it is authoritative because so many different people write it that sometimes it has contradicting facts or wrong statements.

2) I would not say that it is more accurate, but it is definitely more up to date. Also. Encyclopedia Britannica is very concise and to the point. I guess the fact that it is printed on paper and people can't edit it online makes me believe that it is more accurate.

3) Now that I am outside my country (Colombia) I rely mostly on online sources to get my news. At home I usually read a lot more magazines and newspapers. I would say that traditional TV and print journalists are like bloggers too, because many times they report biased news or wrong statements.

4) I think it is better to have other people set a price than economists or appraisers. However, I think it would be hard to get any serious discussion and results on issues such as health care policy.

5) I think it depends on the subject and on how we are going to use that information. If it is for a research paper, we are usually more serious about it than if it is just for general knowledge.

**Ana Toro Ochoa, SFS'09**

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Hello, there is a humorous typo in the message sent to the University community concerning Wikipedia.

The question asks whether it is an "~~authoritative~~ authoritative cite." Cite is a verb, inappropriate and wrong in this phrase. It basically means "to quote" or "to make a reference to." The correct phrase should be "authoritative site." Site is a noun, modified by the adjective that precedes it. Site basically is a location, a place (in this case, on the Internet). *[comment added by later reader: the quoted language is not used in the form of the question that now appears at the top of the page, but had I seen it I would have interpreted "cite" as a shortcut for the noun "citation," not a typo/spelling error for "site"]*

Spelling errors always raise doubts in the minds of many readers about the competence of those posting the information.

Sapienti sat!

Prof. Pilch

Theology Department

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Wikipedia is a source...but a source that should only be used to provide a broad overview of subject...not an authoritative source for critical analysis of an issue for a graduate or undergraduate level paper. Wikipedia enables nonauthoritative personnel to project their thoughts & ideas unto the world. While "nonauthoritative" is akin to beauty, scholarly journals, peer-reviewed papers, and other similar devices are the foundation of critical thought.

Just because one obtains their news from a website vice a newspaper does not mean a critical analysis should cite a wikipedia entry...or a newspaper in most instances.

While knowledge is power, skewed, salacious, malacious, or errant entries can and do skew the world's knowledge base and perceptions.

Treat each Wikipedia entry with skepticism. Wikipedia is a way for every human being to improve their knowledge and that of the world butthe integrity of the datais not assured.

Jake Jacobson, Institute for the Study of Diplomacy

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I have never used Wikipedia , either for a paper or even as a general information source so I can't really comment on it.

My primary sources of news are types of 'old' media institutions like the BBC, Washington Post, Newsweek and The Economist. I believe that these souces have reporters who are both knowledgeable about their subjects and honest about the veracity of their work.

Collective knowledge seems most useful for cultural trends, such as fashion and music rather than analysis of historical and/or news events. The problem of free riders or people making up their minds as to the price or quality of an item without sufficient knowledge about it, means that subject matter experts who work for the benefit of the public goods in areas such as health care and city planning are important.

Jen Bookbinder, Inst. for the Study of Diplomacy, MALAS '09

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1) No, I never use Wikipedia as a source for term papers. It can be useful at times as a research tool to locate another source or get a quick overview. But I am always cautious of the information I get from it.

2) Wikipedia is more up-to-date, but I am not completely confident in its accuracy. I really don't know much about who creates, updates, and verifies Wikipedia's material...thus I would put more trust in the encyclopedia.

3) I get my news from the FT, NYT, Oxford Analytica, WP. I think these sources provide legit stories and I can access them either via paper or on-line.

4) Supply vs. Demand



5) It depends on the subject. Fashion, pop culture news, and movie reviews are less important than hard-news stories.

Sara Thannheuser, Institute for the Study of Diplomacy

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I think Wikipedia is great. It is useful as a refresher and great for researching things that are not generally considered academic. It is usually much faster than a hard copy encyclopedia too, particularly when one topic links to another. As many people have already stated, I would never use it in a paper. It is usually very accurate, but information changes quickly and it is critical in a paper that everyone (or at least the professor and the student) examine the same text. The best Wikipedia entries will give you other websites, books and articles to look at with greater stability. I have yet to take a class where Wikipedia itself was accepted by the professor, but it can be a good place to start. In that way it is not much different from any other encyclopedia; convenient, easy, succinct, but not authoritative. Tyler Morrell

Thanks, Tyler. What do you think the reason is that professors don't like Wikipedia? Do you think because it's too easy? Lord Baltimore

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From Irene Wu (Yahoo! Fellow): Well, it's Friday, and we are well into this ten-day mini-module. Thanks to all who have participated. The forum of this discussion, as you can see, is a wiki, and therefore, the entire page -- including my entry -- is open to editing once you log in. This discussion is an experiment in spontaneously developed social norms, in addition to the subject at hand. On the latter, is it not the case that by using Wikipedia, readers lend it credibility? How many of you have shopped for music CDs at Amazon.com, and made purchases based on customer reviews? If you have, I'll bet a four-star rating based on 100 reviews made you more likely to buy the CD than a five-star rating based on one review. No? If so, perhaps quantity does begin to equal quality, and can bring us closer to the truth. On the other hand, Amazon.com doesn't allow customers to edit other customers. That would be chaos. Maybe even an invasion of privacy! I'll be back in a few more days, with a few more thoughts. - Irene (with some tinkering by Jim DeHart, Institute for the Study of Diplomacy)

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As I was reading through the responses of the participants one thing became inevitably obvious to me – a very strong vocabulary (in both positive and negative sense) that is being used to describe Wikipedia (e.g. skews the world’s knowledge and perceptions, contradicting fact and wrong statements vs. flexible, contains validated primary sources, great research tool, etc) proves that open online information sources have come to play a significant role in our life and pose serious questions about the way we rely on them. I generally agree that Wikipedia is a good way to start a research, but why do we tend to think that sources like Washington Post, Financial Times and the Economist, with their “refined and elegant” styles have much more credibility? Ultimately, the articles are written by human beings, yes, “knowledgeable about their subjects and honest about the veracity of their work” but also subject to the same “skewed, salacious, malicious, or errant” information as Wikipedia authors and readers. I think Ronald Reagan’s famous “trust but verify” is the best prescription when dealing with information from wherever it comes from.

Liza Chuykova  
MSFS’08  
Yahoo! Junior Fellow 2007-2008

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I wouldn’t cite Wikipedia as a "legitimate" source for term papers. It’s anonymous--so I have no clue who wrote the entry. I prefer traditional sources like mainstream newspapers, wire services, and books. In each of those cases, the writer has to have some qualifications for the job and the product passes through the hands of capable editors and reviewers. When I have looked at Wikipedia entries for subjects that I know something about, I often find the entry wrong, sometimes very wrong, though I admit that "wrongness" is subjective. Wikipedia is great for quick info though. What I find useful about Wikipedia and blogs is that the range of issues covered tends to be large. Sometimes the mainstream media doesn’t cover a topic because it isn’t considered newsworthy. You can find a blog about virtually anything..but who knows about the reliability. Bill Morgan, Institute for the Study of Diplomacy

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Wikipedia never will be an authoritative source for academic papers, but that shouldn’t discount its usefulness. People are afraid to

admit that they use Wikipedia as an information source, because its author is never one person but a a collective body of people.

I would argue that Wikipedia has expanded the collective knowledge (even if there are accuracy issues) for the better. It has an excellent check-and-balance system to weed out bad content and bad editors. Wikipedia has evolved into a sophisticated form of self-government. There are editors and caretakers who carefully monitor each other's edits and authorize/repeal each other's powers. I do believe in the collective wisdom of the masses, but it requires scale on the editors' side and self-governance -- qualities that Wikipedia has succeeded at.

Compare this to journalists who may have only a handful of folks who perform a copy edit. We trust professional journalists not for their expertise but their experience and objectiveness in data collection/analysis. Journalistic integrity is still an issue among even the largest and most reputable newspapers with a number of well-publicized cases of story falsification. Journalist integrity is constantly being challenged by the pull of job security and the business of media.

There was a comment about the credibility of blogs being questionable. The key is not to generalize blogs as a single entity. My other comment would be to emphasize that the journalism quality of print media varies as much as that in blogs. Many print/TV journalists now cross over with blogs of their own to respond more rapidly to the 24-hour news cycle. Blogs are now increasingly integrated into the news media, blurring the lines between traditional media and blog reporting. Blog reporting needs to be seen as much as a new distribution point for existing content authors as much as the emergence of a new authors.

Steve Leu  
MBA/MSFS '08  
Yahoo! Junior Fellow 2007-2008

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By the way, I was doing a bit of research today about Wikipedia, and I learned some interesting things. Turns out the origin of "pedia" is not, as most folks assume, the word "encyclopedia." Let me explain. "Wikipedia" actually owes its origins to Baron Claus Von Wichi, a prominent Bavarian associated with the Hapsburgs. During the "springtime of nations" in 1848, Baron Von Wichi endeavored to stimulate political dialogue by posting political commentary on the front door of his home, and encouraged others to attach their responses by

also posting on his door. The postings came to be known as "wichis." The "pedia," according to Hapsburg lore, evolved from the Latin "ped," meaning "to walk," because reaching the door of his vast estate was an arduous trek from the road. As an interesting aside, Baron Von Wichi later became the first (and presumably the oldest) casualty of the first world war when he was caught in the cross-fire of ArchDuke Ferdinand's assassination. While the life of Baron Von Wichi is obscure to most, apparently he's something of a legend among the IT crowd. Bill Gates reportedly makes an annual pilgrimage to his tomb at Pere le chaise cemetery in Paris.

-- Anonymous

**Mini-Module 2 – Identity and Internet**

(February 18–28, 2008)

**Are you more yourself online or in person? People frequently are different in person, when writing in a journal, or when talking on television. The Internet, of course, has made it possible for one person to have many persona.**

**Have you used the Internet to link up with groups of people you would otherwise never join? Has that changed how you think of yourself and what worlds you belong to? Did you ever have an opinion you were afraid to express, but once you found similar opinions online, you felt more comfortable expressing that opinion?**

**An old question is what holds a nation together? What nationality do you belong to, and do you feel the need to stay in touch with others of the same nationality? How do you do that – reading a newspaper, watching TV, corresponding with friends?**

**What about communities which transcend national boundaries? Do you belong to any of these? How do you maintain “membership”? Can you imagine a situation where this kind of community would ever be more important than citizenship in a nation?**

**Comments:**

I would argue that each person is a very heterogeneous substance so we all naturally have several persona that are resurfacing at different phases in our lives. Internet just made it possible to display or hide those quite effectively: you don't have to be yourself in the public electronic domain if you don't want to. I am more myself in person, than online. In fact, I have a hidden mistrust to electronic means of communication, for example try to avoid phone interviews because I need eye contact and body language, that to me are very significant indicators of the direction of our conversation. I like to think that I am expressing my opinions quite freely and openly, regardless of whether somebody with a higher authority (or someone posting in Wikipedia:-) was first to announce that publicly.

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Although nationality provides an individual with a sense of belongingness, in a globalized world that we live in today this is hardly a sustainable link. Family and immediate circle of friends is what makes one feel connected to the world. I use all of the communication channels that are mentioned, namely – correspondence, phone calls, etc. – to keep in touch with these folks. I belong to a massive transnational community of global interns:-) Having interned in multiple places all over the world, I am staying in touch with those who made my time enjoyable while there (email, skype, facebook). --- Liza Chuykova, MSFS'08, Yahoo! Junior Fellow 2007-2008

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When I post online anonymously through message boards and blog comments, I am probably more opinionated on-line because of the anonymity factor. I have used the Internet to link up with various communities. For example, I was active in online communities when I was living abroad to seek out day-to-day living advice from the point of view of ex-pats. I did get to know some of the ex-pats on an on-line basis but never met them in-person. Many of the users were native English-speakers. Having a forum to share and express freely in English our common experiences was very appealing. I also came to depend on the Internet as an “escape” from the local country to access news and content from home.

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I do believe that communities can transcend national boundaries if the common bond is strong enough. However, languages and familiarity with on-line community resources are often the limiting factors. I believe that the level of written English among non-native speakers worldwide allows for the potential for more cross-border communities. I question though to what extent non-native speakers will go out of their way to express their opinion in a different language. It would require that a similar community in their own language not exist. The divergence of various early social networking websites along language lines shows there are still problems achieving “cross-pollination”. Facebook’s attempt to internationalize with the introduction of its Spanish language site in early 2008 will be interesting to watch develop.

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While the power of on-line communities will continue to grow as it becomes more mainstream, accessible, and widely accepted as a social norm, I do not believe it will replace the importance citizenship to a nation in our lifetimes. Still, the rapid pace (less than a decade) at which on-line activities become social norms is astonishing. What fascinates me is not how the current adult generations view and interact within on-line communities but how future youths, who will come of age in a world where on-line communities is the norm, will. ---- Steve Leu , Yahoo! Junior Fellow, MBA/MSFS 2008

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When I lived abroad, I used to stay in touch with my home country through Internet wire services (e.g. AP, Reuters, etc.) I also used to watch satellite TV and have video tapes sent from home. I also used e-mail a lot. The only on-line community that I belong to is LinkedIn. I try to keep these things to a minimum as they tend to become an “obligation”, and I have enough of those. Name: Anonymous, Nationality: USA

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It is a good survey that tries to dig into the thoughts of contemporary people and find the intriguing interaction between online and real world. (1) I have tried to be myself both online and in person. However, I may under consciously portrait myself online the person I expect to become, a more ideal image where I am yet to reach. In this sense, I may be more myself in person. To another extreme, in a unanimous setting when online, I may tend to speak and behave true to myself and without putting on any superficial masks. (2) It’s true. I find myself link up with quite a few groups of people who I would otherwise never join. One reason is the convenience to join - just click certain buttons and then you are in. Another reason is it expands the horizon of network. The third reason is kind of showing case my own interests and concerns if part of the mission of the groups echo with mine. There are two sides to the fact that I am in groups I would otherwise never join. It looks cool and attracting, but sometimes it’s a little disappointing that those are only something on my profile but don’t carry true significance in terms of real connection and sense of belonging or association. (3) No significant changes have I sensed in myself and the worlds I belong to. (4) It may happen, especially when I google and can always find tons of information or links on certain topics and opinion. It appears that the world has become more and

more tolerant to almost everything, even those against conventional wisdom or traditional ideas. (5) Language, core values, and the last probably is system (either political or ideological). I heard about a saying that language actually holds a nation together and that if you want to destroy a nation better start from taking away its language and soon the nation would lose its identity and fall apart. (6) China. I constantly feel the need to stay in touch with people of the same nationality. Part of the reason is a motivation to do something for my nation, and also I keenly feel that it is the core of my identity in front of the world. (7) Staying tuned to the new updates of my country through surfing the internet and talking with friends. (8) I like that. Those communities that transcend national boundaries usually carry some idea with social concerns and the transcending feature helps create a bigger platform for them to leverage resources and expertise from a broader sphere. (9) Yes, I belong to some of those communities, like Net Impact, Room to Read, and some nonsense ones. (10) How do you maintain “members”? Sometimes it is hard to maintain “members” I believe, since there are geographic and other limits. (11) To certain point that may become a reality. For some people who strongly feel passion for certain cause or who regard their association with those who share their interests or beliefs may find their identity as a member of certain communities would exceed their national citizenship. --- Yongmei Wang, MBA 08

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It is easier to be more outgoing and confident online. I would same I'm the same online and in person, but it's much easier to exaggerate your strengths and minimize your weaknesses (perceived or otherwise) online. --- Anonymous

Hey Anonymous,

Why didn't you sign your name? Would signing your name make you feel less confident about writing that? I'm just curious how that ties into what you wrote...

-Anonymous2

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Common interests hold nations together. A united cause naturally brings all sorts of people together. I am American, but my husband is Georgian. Through him, and my experiences and friends in Georgia, I very much identify with Georgians. I do all of the above mentioned things to keep in touch with Georgia, plus any other opportunity that



presents itself (i.e. church and online groups, the Embassy, etc.) ---  
Anonymous

I feel myself in person rather than on line. I like to join groups, however there might be barriers to entry or information circulated in those groups might be of limited quality. I prefer to express my opinion in person rather than online. I am a Serb national and I feel the need to stay in touch with my community, through news, email and Skype. A community of my friends is spread across the globe, it is very important for me to stay in touch with them. No, I cannot imagine a situation where this kind of community would ever be more important than my citizenship.

--- Pavle Milekić, MA, Center for Eurasian, Russian, and East European Studies, 2009

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I am more myself in person than online, surprisingly. While it is understandable that being online allows you to take an “avatar” and thus act more like yourself due to a lack of fear and inhibition that may arise from perception of being judged, for me human contact and intuition is a more personally defining moment/opportunity. I have always been hesitant in expressing my opinions be it online or in person. Naturally, when a similar opinion is expressed in any situation, I feel more emboldened to express mine.

I find it very important to interact with people of your nationality and culture. This is a way for me to maintain my roots and appreciate it/understand it, in today’s globalizing world. (P.T.O.) I stay attuned to my culture by keeping in constant touch with my family and friends. Also, I read newspapers, magazines and follow the developments of my country very closely.

Beyond nationality, however, I think there’s an even more powerful community held together by ideas. I see this sort of an association playing a significant role in the future – more so than associations of kinship and nationality. This transnational community is becoming more relevant in a globalizing world where ideas bring people together. -----Anonymous, MSFS 2008

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A nation is held together within profound boundaries that transcend religion and language. Tradition, religion, language are important components that help to fortify these boundaries, but tolerance,

moral principles and a community identification should always prevail. ---Gustavo Dominguez, MSFS 2008

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I am more of myself in person than online. In person, you tend to give others your best impression of who you really are. Online, you tend to be a faker.

Yes. No, not really. No, I do not have second thoughts on what I say or express to others.

Culture holds a nation together. I am a proud Trini-American...I belong to the best of both worlds. I am diverse as it is and living in the United States (States) makes it even better. You can certainly learn a lot from other individuals and having so many nationalities throughout the States one should definitely branch out and explore what is out there. At times I do feel the need of staying in touch with others of the same nationality because I can connect with them better. In doing so, I listen to music; read the newspaper both from Trinidad and here in the States; watch TV; and correspond with friends through emails, chatting online or even talking with them over the phone. - Indra Newal Dass, Information Officer, MSFS

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I act about the same online as I do offline. I think the lines between the two worlds will become quite blurred in the next decade. Some people will continue to imagine a distinction between the two, but they are becoming more enmeshed with each other every day. As mapping data is overlaid onto things like Google Maps, and then devices are made to overlay visually that data into how we see the world, we'll wonder how we ever lived without all the rich information pouring into our augmented vision.

I've worked with people through contracts who I've never met in person, only online. I have friends I know exclusively online. I am familiar with many different online communities, all specialized in their own expertise. That is the strength of the internet -- its ability to dissolve borders and allow like minds to gather together instead of being limited by physicality.

I am comfortable sharing my opinion but definitely other people are not. Restrictions placed upon freedom of speech are stricter now than they used to be for one's professional life. In the Army, you need to have your blog registered with public affairs, and all content screened first, and your commander needs to be aware of your online

activities. Private-sector jobs are becoming more and more invasive about online expressions of speech.

-Ben Turner, MSFS '09 (int'l development/social entrepreneurship)

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On-line, we can be smarter than we really are. There are no awkward pauses, no need for small talk, none of the banalities/inanities of a normal conversation. If something clever doesn't come to mind, we can walk away, think about it, come back and type some piece of wisdom, and pretend it was effortless. If we're still not happy with what we're written, we can delete and re-formulate until it's worthy of a Pulitzer. Here, I'm doing it now. After all, this isn't an old typewriter. I don't have to fuss with white-out. (and, by the way, since it's so easy to delete and re-write, there's no need to organize thoughts in advance, no need for mental discipline; just let it flow). The ability to put your best foot forward in print can be a relief. There's not so much pressure, and who wants all the idle chit-chat anyway? But it can also be a place to hide out, and too much of it, I think, can make your brain soft.

- Jim DeHart, ISD Research Associate

**Mini-Module 3 — Information, Technology, and Power**

(March 10–20, 2008)

**The Internet and related information technologies make it possible for more and more people to have access to more and more information.**

**Individuals. When was the last time you used the Internet to collect information on someone? Why did you do it? Is it OK if someone else collects information on you?**

**Companies. When is it OK for companies to collect information on you? Does it make a difference if you are a customer of the company? How about if a company asks you to provide information about yourself or others, when do you agree or not? Have you ever asked a company for the information they have about you, or about someone else?**

**Governments. What kind of information is it OK for a government to collect on people, what kind of information is not? If a government asks you to give information on someone else, when is it OK, when is it not? Let's flip the question now. When is it OK for the government to withhold information from people, when is it not?**

**What are the sources of power? Military? Control of government? Influence over ideas? What kind of power do you have?**

**Comments:**

One perspective on power is how it arises from obtaining information during strategic interactions. This approach using game theory would argue that someone who has more information about what strategies another player (could be anything: individuals, institutions, corporations, governments, etc...) would use is better at making their own decisions on what strategy of their own to play. In this sense, it's all how you play the game that creates power, and those who have more information are more capable of making decisions and playing a better game. Collecting information en masse via corporate/govt datamining is a good way to create a large database of information that could be analyzed to extract useful conclusions when the need arises.

Mark Wegner

Georgetown University

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A couple of days ago. I was getting ready for my job interview so I needed to learn more about the individual who was going to interview me. There is not a whole lot of information on me available in public sources, but otherwise I don't mind people collecting info on me.

It is ok for companies to collect info on me if I am their customer and their intention is to make their service better. I will not provide information on others, the company should approach those "others" individually, not through me. I have asked what info the company has on me, never on others.

The government should be allowed to collect information for tax purposes only. They do however collect all sorts of information without asking for permission and society takes it as a norm.

I don't want to think that I have some specific powers, rather abilities to influence the outcomes.

Alex Stoyanov  
Brookings Institution

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I was on Facebook website to see what my college friends are up to these days. More or less ok, as long as it's information that I choose to make available. When I know they're collecting and what they're collecting

Yeah, it's better/more acceptable if I'm a customer. I agree when my providing info on myself will allow me to get better service and products. I won't provide information on others, unless those people want me to provide information to the company. No. It's ok if the government collects information for tax purposes and criminal investigations. I'll give the government information on other people if they want me to. It's not ok for the government to withhold information if it would threaten people's lives or cause them harm. Many sources of power ... too many to list.

Anonymous

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Used Facebook yesterday to spy on old girlfriends – I was bored and jealous. I don't want companies collecting money on me unless and explicitly give them permission. Government should not collect information on people except for contact with questionable foreign individuals.

Anonymous

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The last time that used the Internet to collect information on someone was to find a faculty member whose expertise matched an article submitted to the Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, which I did online because many tasks in the editorial process are conducted in cyberspace. It is OK if someone else collects information on me as long as that information is for an end that does not restrict my privacy or cause me harm.

Eric Peter  
Georgetown University

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As an avid Facebook user, I would say that I collect information on other people every day just by looking at the "mini feed" feature on my Facebook home page. I did it just to see what's going on in my friends' lives; since they all go to college hundreds of miles away, it's hard to stay in touch sometimes, so I like to know what they've been up to. I am fine with companies collecting information about me online, since I feel I have represented myself well on the Internet. Additionally, I feel it is important to know what potential employees will be saying in private, as their poor habits can reflect badly on a company if said employee is in a high-level position.

Ohm J. Gore  
Georgetown University  
COL '11

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Hello all,  
This is something I wrote in the Fall of 2005, when I was an undergraduate in the Walsh School. It is not as polished as I would like it to be, but it is somewhat apropos of the topic this thread is discussing. I hope it might prove interesting....

Chuck Prahl  
BSFS/ MA SSP 2008

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I tend to think of "power" as the ability to get other people to do what you want them to do. Still, there are various levels of power. All power is derived from soft (alliances, economic factors, reputation,

etc) and hard components (military, infrastructure, population, access to raw materials, etc) but it varies in the degree to which the other party is aware of the fact that you are exercising your power. In the simplest form, one convinces others to do something with the understanding that there would be some reciprocal “back scratching” later on. Power as such is in its weakest and least effectual form. Secondly, one party can convince another that the aims and goals it has are the same or correspond to a second party. Power exerted in this way is usually very effective, but can still result in the acknowledgment of some sort of debt to the second party. Lastly, power in its most effective manifestation is the scenario in which one exercises invisible power over an entity to a degree that it believes that the actions it is taking are of its own volition and not due to any prodding on your part at all when in fact you have been working all along to ensure the appropriate course of action was taken. This form results the most infrequently in the future diminished bargaining power of the first party (the US) and minimizes the number of debts we may have to honor at some future point.

The rise of a rich national information infrastructure has made the United States more powerful I believe. The Law of Accelerating Returns, which governs semiconductor technology (Moore’s Law) and many other aspects of technical advancement in our society, is ultimately increasing the effective working and thinking capacity of every individual and actually greatly expanding subjective time. When every person- with the aid of exponentially improving technology- can do in one hour what used to take two, every minute effectively becomes twice as valuable. Or, seen another way, each minute becomes twice as long. This is, of course, a theoretical construct, but the expansion of subjective time is an important aspect of the advances in advanced IT which first world nations are certainly benefiting from more than the rest of the planet and which the US is arguably benefiting from most of all. Furthermore, if nation-states are losing sovereignty in that they are increasingly unable to manage information flows within their borders, then it is also true that democratic states that have very free flows of information are certainly losing less than anyone else.

The US is widening its lead in other ways as well. Although manufactures and other production may be shifting to other nations, the fact remains that the real value of any product depends on where value is added. In IT the value added has nothing to do with the cheap, mass produced components of technology. It has everything to do with the creation of new processes, tools and foundational architectures. The United States remains a global leader in this regard and so should not

lose power in any meaningful measure in any short to mid-term projection.

However, in the longer term, we will lose our edge over the rest of the world in information technology as more IT is engineered in the developing countries of the world. Still, the loss of the IT edge does not necessarily correlate to a loss in U.S. power because our primary influence in the 21st century will be our soft power. Soft power does not require us to have a lead in IT, but rather requires us to be able to get others to want to do what we want them to do. This ability stems primarily from our values—as expressed in our culture and how we conduct ourselves internationally<sup>[1]</sup>, not from our competitive edge in IT. For example, Hubert Vedrine has lamented that America is so powerful because it can inspire the dreams and aspirations of others, drawing large numbers of international students here to finish their studies and ultimately seek employment.<sup>[2]</sup> Soft power is an important reality which draws the best and brightest from around the world, not because we compel them, but because they want to be here for their own self-interest. The U.S. must not lift a finger to accrue this huge benefit, the envy of all modern states.

As we lose our IT edge, we probably will decline in relative military power. There are many realists who deny the supremacy of soft power and predict that these hard power losses—the only power many realists recognize—will diminish our standing internationally. They scoff at my reasoning, noting the difficulties inherent in accurately measuring soft power. I must admit that there are no good metrics for quantifying the level and effects of soft power in the way traditional realists might derive the value of an additional battalion of armor or wing of fighters in a military build-up scenario. Many would also say that without hard power, soft power would not matter at all—it is ultimately the threat of force which backs even the most benign looking uses of soft power.

I cannot deny that the best combination possible is to have both hard and soft power. That is, the U.S. benefits immensely from being both the military powerhouse of the world as well as the seat of a cultural empire with increasingly global reach.<sup>[3]</sup> In the past it may have been a necessary condition to be militarily preeminent in order to export your culture—one needed a military presence to exert soft power—but that does not hold true today.

Both Rome and the Soviet Union exported their values and culture to the very limit of the territories their armies had conquered—and no

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1. Nye, Joseph. *The Paradox of American Power*, 9

2. *ibid*



further. The Soviet Union collapsed, despite its preponderance of military might, with almost no violence whatsoever. The power of Soviet-communist ideas to exert soft power over people, even their own military forces, had failed so miserably that even those who were supposed to be guarantors of the system became cynical of it. In comparison, the U.S. exports its culture and values far beyond its borders—over an empire on which the sun never sets.<sup>[4]</sup> So long as the U.S. remains as open and free a society as it is today, admitting (within reason) all those who wish entry, there should be no problem maintaining or even increasing our level of soft power. The surplus of soft power vis-à-vis the world will more than make up for whatever deficit is created as aspects of our military power decline as the IT gap closes.

From a commercial point of view, it is obvious that the information that an on-line business can gather about you is tremendously rich and powerful for its marketing and data mining interests. As users and consumers of these on-line entities, we agree to whatever "user agreement" regarding its use of our personal data that is presented in front of us. Transparency exists, but as consumers, we rarely take the time to understand these policies. Should these companies be compelled to present this information in a more "laymen-like" and digestible format? In many cases, they already are. Is on-line privacy a legitimate consumer activist issue if we are agreeing to policies that we barely read but agree to?

In addition, companies have for a long time gathered and had access to marketing data about anybody in the formal economy. It is not a new phenomenon, but it certainly has deepened, broadened, and been made more permanent. Our commercial transactions in banking have long been recorded even before the emergence of the Internet.

What I believe that has been even more transformative (and worrisome for many) is the ease of which an individual can actively seek out information about another. This option did not exist previously, and this is the driving force for why even on this mini-module, so many choose to post anonymously. Equally worrisome is the ease at which one can post information on-line about another individual without

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3. Joe Joffe, Co-editor of *Die Zeit*, made the following interesting remarks in January of 2000: "...the best deal you can get is when hard power and soft power come together. The Vatican has a lot of soft power but it has no hard power and so that means the influence of the Vatican is limited. Switzerland has a lot of soft power but nothing in the hard power field. So if you really want to sit pretty today you have to be like the United States, because the United States has all of these resources in spades." (<http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people/Joffe/joffe-con4.html>)

4. Nye, 11

his/her consent and/or knowledge. Thus, even a "responsible" on-line citizen can be subject to having his/her information shared on-line. Does this create strong disincentives for an individual to participate in on-line communities? And if one does so, anonymously, does this dilute one's contribution?

Steve Leu

Yahoo! Junior Fellow 2007-2008

## **ABOUT THE FELLOWSHIP**

The Yahoo! Fellow in Residence is a one year appointment, funded by the Yahoo! Fund on International Values, Communications Technology & the Global Internet, at Georgetown University.

The Yahoo! Fellow in Residence is chosen by Georgetown University from applicants drawn from the government, corporate, non-profit and academic sectors. Preference is given to individuals with an interest in China, India, Russia and Brazil, which are populous countries with large markets whose growing integration with the global economy pose important challenges for how communications technologies and the global internet affect, and are affected by, national systems and practices.

The Yahoo! Fellow in Residence is part of the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy (ISD) at the Georgetown School of Foreign Service. The application process occurs in the spring. Complete application details on this fellowship are provided on the Institute's website, <http://isd.georgetown.edu>.

The Yahoo! Fellow will pursue educational and research activities that explore how international values apply to the development and use of new communications technologies. Projects can draw on insights from many disciplines, including politics, economics, business, and socio-cultural research. The projects should explore how value-based principles can maximize the benefits and minimize the costs of new communications technologies for diverse institutions and individuals around the world. Examples of potential research topics might include how international values could guide the operation and regulation of the global internet on issues such as personal privacy, freedom of expression, education, socio-cultural change, and cross-national contacts among civil society groups.

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