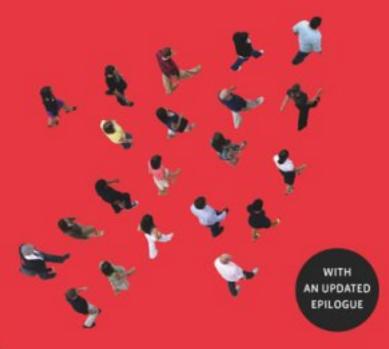The Power of Organizing Without Organizations

HERE COMES EVERYBODY

Revolution doesn't happen when society adopts new
technology, it happens when society adopts new behaviors

CLAY SHIRKY

WITH
AN UPDATED
EPILOGUE

HERE COMES EVERYBODY

THE POWER OF ORGANIZING
WITHOUT ORGANIZATIONS

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SOLVING SOCIAL DILEMMAS

There are real and permanent social dilemmas, which can only be optimized for, never completely solved. The human social repertoire includes many such optimizations, which social tools can amplify.

Let's say, for the sake of illustration, that you and I went out for a few drinks last Saturday night, and at around 2 a.m. one of us said, "Hey, I know! Let's steal a car!" (I think it was you who said that.) So we steal a car, one thing leads to another, mistakes are made, and half an hour later we crash right through the window of a store. We barely have time to jump out and pretend to be bystanders before the police arrive.

Now the police aren't really buying the bystander alibi, but they don't have any other witnesses, so they take us off into separate rooms for questioning. Once we are separated, they make each of us this offer: "Look, we think you're innocent, but we suspect the other person in the car was responsible. If you tell us what you know about them, we'll give you a big reward,

and file charges against them. But you gotta tell us right now, and if you don't, we're going to hold you overnight." Since each of us is getting this offer, it creates four possibilities:

1. We each stick to our stories, they've got no evidence, and they keep us both overnight.
2. I stick to the bystander story and you turn me in. You get a reward, while I get charged.
3. I turn you in while you stick to the story. I get a reward, while you get charged.
4. We turn each the other in. We both get charged.

So knowing that I face the same choice as you—sticking to my story or turning you in—what do you do?

The worst outcome would clearly be getting charged with a crime, and the best outcome would be getting the reward. You know that I know that too, and if we both try to get the reward, we both get charged. The second best outcome is spending the night in jail, but you know that I know that too, and if you stick to your story in an attempt to get this outcome, I can go for the reward by turning you in. Similarly, if I stick to my story in an attempt to get the night in jail, you can turn me in to try to get the reward, but if we both try to get the reward, we both get charged—back to the worst outcome again.

This is a simplified version of the Prisoners' Dilemma, a social science thought experiment about how people make decisions. (The payoff matrix is bit more complex in the standard version, but the dilemma is the same.) Assuming that the two people can't communicate with each other and don't trust each other (about which more in a moment), the worst

outcome—number four—is the rational one, an outcome called a Nash equilibrium. The dilemma of the Prisoners' Dilemma is that, because it is a one-off transaction in which you and I can't communicate with each other, we can't coordinate any outcome better than the dismal Nash equilibrium. (This is the same math underlying the Tragedy of the Commons, where the Nash equilibrium encourages individual defection, even as it damages the group.) Things change, though, when the prisoners interact with each other repeatedly, a version called an iterated Prisoners' Dilemma.

Robert Axelrod, a sociologist at the University of Michigan who studied the iterated version extensively, staged tournaments for different software programs emulating the prisoners. Each program was given a strategy for when to cooperate and when to defect (the same two choices you and I faced in our notional interrogation rooms). These strategies were measured by adding or deducting points for the various outcomes. After running the tournament with many different participating strategies, ranging from "always defect" to "cooperate or defect at random," Axelrod found that a single strategy, called Tit-for-Tat, was most successful against every other strategy tried. Tit-for-Tat started by trying to cooperate the first time it was paired with any other program. If that program also cooperated, then Tit-for-Tat would offer to cooperate in the next round, and so on. As long as another program offered to cooperate, Tit-for-Tat would continue to do so as well. If the other program defected, though, taking advantage of Tit-for-Tat's trusting behavior, then Tit-for-Tat would defect against that program in the next round, effectively punishing the

other program as a way of communicating that its trusting nature extended only to those who reciprocate.

This strategy is a highly simplified version of real life—the more general lesson is that people who interact with one another repeatedly communicate through their actions, introducing what Axlerod calls "the shadow of the future." We all face the Prisoners' Dilemma whenever we interact with people we could take advantage of, or people who could take advantage of us, yet actually manage to trust one another often enough to accomplish things in groups. The shadow of the future makes it possible for me to act on your behalf today, even at some risk or cost to me, on the expectation that you will remember and reciprocate tomorrow.

New Tools to Create Social Capital

Over on University Place in lower Manhattan, a few blocks from my office, is the local bowling alley. Bowling often conjures up an era of picket fences and twenty-five-cent Cokes, and our local bowling emporium even has a name reminiscent of that time—Bowlmor Lanes. On any given Friday night, though, Bowlmor is very much an institution of the moment, catering to martini-sipping twentysomethings instead of factory workers unwinding with a beer. Through the decades bowling has been persistently reinvented, and it remains a durably popular activity. But between the 1950s and now there has been one significant change—a precipitous decline in league bowling, with its memberships and seasons and uniforms and all the

rest. Though plenty of groups bowl at Bowlmor Lanes, they are mainly people who already know one another; the bowling is more a consequence of group interaction than a source of it. The gradual disappearance of bowling leagues is one of many reductions in social mechanisms whereby people may be introduced to one another as a consequence of shared activity. This doesn't matter much for the fate of Bowlmor Lanes—a customer is a customer, league or no—but it may matter for the country.

When Robert Putnam, a Harvard sociologist, published *Bowling Alone* in 2000, it was an immediate sensation. His account of the weakening of community in the United States, based on a huge number of indicators from the decline of picnicking to the abandonment of league bowling, offered two provocative observations. First, much of the success of the United States as a nation has had to do with its ability to generate social capital, that mysterious but critical set of characteristics of functioning communities. When your neighbor walks your dog while you are ill, or the guy behind the counter trusts you to pay him next time, social capital is at work. It is the shadow of the future on a societal scale. Individuals in groups with more social capital (which is to say, more habits of cooperation) are better off on a large number of metrics, from health and happiness to earning potential, than those in groups with less social capital. Societies characterized by a high store of social capital overall do better than societies with low social capital on a similarly wide range of measurements, from crime rate to the costs of doing business to economic growth.

This is the shadow of the future at work: direct reciprocity assumes that if you do someone a favor today, that person will

do you a favor tomorrow. Indirect reciprocity is even more re-markable—it assumes that if you do someone in your commu-nity a favor today, someone in your community will be around to do you a favor tomorrow, even if it isn't the same person. The set of norms and behaviors that instantiates the shadow of the future is social capital, a set of norms that facilitate cooperation within or among groups.

It was Putnam's second observation, however, that gener-ated the real reaction. Across a remarkably broad range of measures, participation in group activities, the vehicle for cre-ating and sustaining social capital, was on the decline in the United States. Putting the two observations together, he con-cluded that one of the greatest assets in the growth and stabil-ity of the United States was ebbing away. One cause of the decline in social capital was a simple increase in the difficulty of people getting together—an increase in transaction costs, to use Coase's term. When an activity becomes more expen-sive, either in direct costs or increased hassle, people do less of it, and several effects of the last fifty years—including smaller households, delayed marriage, two-worker families, the spread of television, and suburbanization—have increased the transaction costs for coordinating group activities outside work. For most people the only possible reaction to Putnam's conclusion was nostalgia for a lost world of Rotary clubs and ice cream socials. One person, though, took it as an opportu-nity. In the 1990s Scott Heiferman had founded and sold a successful web business in New York City, and he was looking for his next business idea when he read *Bowling Alone*. Instead of regarding it as news of an inevitable decline, he set about trying to reinvigorate the creation of social capital through

real-world interaction. The solution he came up with was surprisingly simple.

First Heiferman assumed that people knew what they were missing and would want it back if they could get it; in an era of declining social capital, people would take steps to increase their communal participation if someone could make it easy again. Second, he recognized that treating the internet as some sort of separate space—cyberspace, as it was often called—was part of the problem. That word, coined by William Gibson in his novel *Neuromancer*, refers to a kind of alternate reality mediated by the world's communications networks. The cyberspace of *Neuromancer* is a visual representation of all the world's data; John Perry Barlow, a digital rights activist, later used the word to refer to the social spaces of the internet. Whether visual or social, though, the basic sense of cyberspace was that it was a world separate and apart from the real world. The predicted end point of this process was a progressive disassociation of social life from real space, leading to the death of cities as the population spread out to more bucolic spots.

The assumption that communications tools are (or will someday be) a good substitute for travel assumes that people mainly gather together for utilitarian reasons of sharing information. Companies have been selling us this idea since the invention of the telegraph, and AT&T's famous Picturephone, first launched at the 1964 World's Fair, was pitched as a way to reduce the need for travel. This reduction did not happen, not in 1964 or ever. If communication were a substitute for travel, then the effects would have shown up by now, but they haven't. In 1978 President Carter deregulated the airlines, causing travel prices to fall, but telecommunications stocks

didn't collapse; they rose. Similarly, in 1984 Judge Harold Greene broke up AT&T, leading to a rapid decrease in long-distance phone call costs; airline customers increased that year. Communication and travel are complements, not substitutes. Chris Meyer, a globe-trotting consultant for the Monitor Group, observes that "better communications make it easier for me to keep in touch with the office, so I spend *more* time on the road, talking to clients."

We gather together because we like to, and because it is useful. Assuming that videophones or e-mail or virtual reality will reduce the overall amount of travel is like assuming that liquor stores will kill bars, since liquor stores sell drinks much more cheaply than bars do. In fact, the reason people go to bars is not simply to get a drink, but to do so in a convivial environment. Similarly, cities don't exist just because people have had to be nearby to communicate; cities exist because people like to be near other people, and it is this fact, rather than the mere trading of information, that creates social capital. (Anyone who predicts the death of cities has already met their spouse.) This obvious human preference was overlooked during the early public spread of the internet, in large part because the average user interacted with different people online and offline.

What seemed like a deep social change in the 1990s was revealed to be a temporary accident by the year of Meetup's founding. The idea of cyberspace made sense when the population of the internet had a few million users; in that world social relations online really were separate from offline ones, because the people you would meet online were different from the people you would meet offline, and these worlds would rarely overlap. But that separation was an accident of

partial adoption. Though the internet began to function in its earliest form in 1969, it was not until 1999 that any country had a majority of its citizens online. (Holland was first, but that condition now applies to most countries in the developed world.) In the developed world, the experience of the average twenty-five-year-old is one of substantial overlap between online and offline friends and colleagues. The overlap is so great, in fact, that both the word and the concept of "cyberspace" have fallen into disuse. The internet augments real-world social life rather than providing an alternative to it. Instead of becoming a separate cyberspace, our electronic networks are becoming deeply embedded in real life.

Heiferman realized that if enough people are online, you don't have to group them solely by affinity (pug lovers, White Stripes fans, libertarians, whatever). Instead you can group them by affinity *and* proximity (pug lovers in Poughkeepsie, White Stripes fans in Walla Walla). He designed Meetup to help people find each other online and then meet in the real world, taking the burden of coordination off the hands of the potential users. Meetup users can search by interest (Are there any relevant Meetups in my town?) or they can look by area (I live in Milwaukee, what Meetups are nearby?)

By registering people's interests and location, Meetup can identify latent groups and help them come together. Heiferman bet that all over the United States (and later, the world) latent groups would be happy to get together if someone solved the coordination problem. Armed with this intuition (and the work of a talented group of programmers and designers), he launched the service. In early talks to potential users or inves-

tors he sometimes presented Meetup as a kind of time machine, reinvigorating classic American interest groups—people who shared an interest in bowling, cars, or Chihuahuas. (He talked about people who liked Chihuahuas so often, in fact, that it became a trademark bit of his spiel.)

The groups that actually ended up using Meetup didn't look anything like Heiferman expected. Here's the list of the fifteen most active Meetups the year after the site launched:

Topic	Total Meetups	Total Members
Witches	442	6,757
Slashdot	401	11,809
LiveJournal	311	10,691
Bloggers	136	4,222
Pagans	90	2,841
Fark	81	4,621
Ex–Jehovah's Witness	67	1,609
Bookcrossing	56	4,414
Xena	51	1,641
Tori Amos	47	2,261
Ultima	38	2,467
Star Trek	35	1,196
Radiohead	32	1,986
Vampires	28	1,339
Atheists	27	1,338

This list is unlike any list of American groups ever assembled. It measures something important (or rather it collates several different important things) because it demonstrates

that Meetup's convening power lies nor in recreating older civic groups but in creating new ones.

The groups represented here can be divided into three broad categories. The first, including Witches, Pagans, Ex–Jehovah's Witnesses, and Atheists, are people who share some religious or philosophical outlook but have no support from the broader U.S. culture. There are many more Presbyterians than pagans in the United States, but the Presbyterians aren't on this list because they don't need Meetup to figure out when and how to assemble; they meet every Sunday morning at the Presbyterian church. Because they are both internally organized and externally supported, Presbyterians suffer less than pagans from transaction costs, who have no culturally normal place and time to meet and no ready way to broadcast their interests without censure. Jehovah's Witnesses enjoy advantages similar to those of other Christian sects, but ex-Witnesses turn to Meetup because they don't enjoy those socially supported advantages of coordination.

The second category of Meetup groups includes the members of websites and services who would like to assemble with other users of those services in real life. This group includes Slashdot, LiveJournal, Bloggers, Fark, Ultima, and Bookcrossing. (Interestingly, the numbers show how clustered these groups are; though Slashdot and LiveJournal had more members than Witches did, they met in fewer cities; or put another way, Witches are more evenly distributed in U.S. society than are geeks or bloggers.) This is what the end of cyberspace looks like: the popularity of these Meetup groups suggests that meeting online isn't enough and that after communicating with one another using these various services, the members become convinced that they share enough to want to get together in the

real world. Especially relevant to this thesis is the Ultima group. Ultima is an online game set in an imaginary world, Britannia, rendered in 3D, where players interact with one another. It is one of a class of games called "massively multiplayer online role-playing games," or MMOs for short. If virtual interactions were ever enough to be completely satisfying, we'd expect them to work best in these virtual worlds. But the popularity of Meetup groups for virtual contacts shows that even online communication that emulates face-to-face interaction still leaves people wanting real human contact.

The third category includes fans of cultural icons whose work is quirky enough that those fans want to be in one another's presence. LiveJournal users can at least potentially come in contact with one another on the website, but Tori Amos fans are simply guessing that they will get along. (The Vampires group falls into both the first and third categories.) To want to be in other people's company without having spoken before, on the basis of a shared cultural affinity, is a pretty good advertisement for Heiferman's initial thesis—that even in a mediated age, people crave real human contact.

These three categories have several things in common. First, they represent not just things people do but ways they think of themselves (and of other people). Many more people use Google than LiveJournal, but there is no broad interest in a Google users' Meetup group. Second, this self-conception translates into a desire to meet with other people who share the same interests. Many more people were watching *Everybody Loves Raymond* in 2002 than were watching *Xena: Warrior Princess*, but *Xena*-fandom was a better predictor of real commonality. Finally, the world provided no easy way for these

people to find one another prior to Meetup. Because the audience for *Xena* was passionate but small, the likelihood that *Xena* fans would find one another at random was similarly small, but precisely because of this minority status, the likelihood that, once they did, they would feel some sense of kinship was higher than average. This effect is general. Lada Adamic, a researcher at HP Labs, studied the users of an online student center at Stanford called Club Nexus, and they found that two students were likely to be friends if their interests overlapped, and that the likelihood rose if the shared interests were more specific. (Two people who like fencing are likelier to be friends than two people who like football.) The net effect is that it's easier to like people who are odd in the same ways you are odd, but it's harder to find them. Meetup, by solving the finding problem, created an outlets for many new groups—groups that had never been able to gather before.

Meetup didn't end up recreating the old model of community, because it provided a different set of capabilities; the groups that took first and best advantage of those capabilities were the groups with a latent desire to meet but had faced previously insuperable hurdles. These groups aren't the classic American interest groups of yore; many of the most popular groups tell us surprising things about what our society is like right now.

Stay at Home Moms and the Politics of Exclusion

One of the most popular current groups on Meetup is Stay at Home Moms (SAHM). Mothers with young children have

been gathering in groups since before the invention of the internet, in fact before the invention of agriculture. This is an old pattern, so why would SAHM Meetups be so popular? The answer, in one sentence, is that modern life has raised transaction costs so high that even ancient habits of congregation have been defeated. As a result, things that used to happen as a side effect of regular life now require some overt coordination.

Some of the hurdles to be overcome are physical. As of the 2000 census, a majority of the U.S. population lived in the suburbs, and in the suburbanized United States, physical distance raises several barriers. Houses are often separated from commerce, so much of the time spent doing errands or ferrying children from hither to yon is spent in a car. In a pedestrian setting, running into someone is a good thing; in a car, not so much. Both the distance between the grocery store and home, and the fact that travel between the two is highly enclosed, reduce the likelihood of chance social encounters (and as a result reduces the raw material for building social capital).

As the two-income family has become more normal, the center of gravity for social interaction has shifted from the neighborhood to the workplace. Not only have the suburbs reduced the likelihood of chance encounters, but the increased percentage of the population with jobs, including especially a sharp increase in the number of women, means that the workplace now has many of the characteristics that the neighborhood used to have. You are likelier to be introduced to new coworkers than to new neighbors, and interactions at work produce the kind of familiarity and trust that used to be more a part of the fabric of our communities.

Meetup makes the coordination of groups simple, offering

a way of undoing at least some of the damage inflicted on that fabric. This is one reason groups like Stay at Home Moms matter so much. Some groups we expect to be technology-obsessed; maleness, singleness, and youth all correlate with technophilia, while femaleness, age, and family life don't. So when a group of mothers adopts a piece of technology, it indicates an expression of preference far more serious than seeing a thirteen-year-old boy go wild over an Xbox. The popularity of groups like Stay at Home Moms indicates that Meetup's utility in helping people gather in the real world is valuable enough to get the attention of people who are too busy for most new tools.

The most successful Meetup parents' group didn't turn out to be the most general one. Meetup also lists a Parents and Kids Playgroup, which describes a much larger class of potential members than Stay at Home Moms does, but the Parents and Kids group is significantly less popular. This is one of the essential conundrums of social capital—inclusion implies exclusion. The very name Stay at Home Moms is a salvo in the decades-long conversation about the ideal structure of a family—this group is for mothers who are playing a relatively traditional role in child-raising. Though it is hard to imagine a man with a child being turned away from the North Charlotte Stay at Home Moms Meetup, say, it's also hard to imagine that a lot of dads show up in the first place.

Self-Help We Don't Approve Of

In 2002 I taught a graduate course at New York University called "Social Weather," about the experience of participating

in online groups. The course's title was an analogy to the way the weather affects our mood; in the class we were looking at how social groups create an emotional environment that affects all the participants. One of my students in that class, Erika Jaeggli, was also working on the magazine *YM*'s website. *YM* (formerly *Young Miss,* then *Your Magazine,* then just *YM*) is designed to appeal to teen girls. In 2002, like almost every other magazine in the country, *YM* was wrestling with how to embrace the Web. In addition to putting the magazine's articles online, the staff created a set of online bulletin boards where *YM* readers could go online and talk to one another about whatever was on their mind. Popular topics included clothes, school, romance, and health and beauty—pretty standard fare for teen girls. Erika's job was half host, half chaperone, working to draw the girls out and make them feel comfortable talking to one another, while also keeping the conversation from devolving into name-calling or turning to inappropriate subjects. Particularly at an age when readers were exploring previously off-limits subjects like sex or the use of alcohol and other drugs, the role of an editor was a balancing act. Too little intervention, and the conversation would turn into bedlam; too much would seem like a ham-handed attempt to bring the girls into line—precisely the kind of treatment from adults they were coming to the *YM* website to escape.

A few months into the semester Erika stopped me in the hallway to tell me *YM* was shutting down its health and beauty bulletin board. When I expressed surprise that a magazine focused on teen girls would kill off those discussions, she said, "Most of the girls were fine, but we couldn't figure out how to stop this one group of girls from swapping tips on remaining

anorexic." These Pro-Ana girls (short for pro-anorexia) were posting pictures of models and actresses whose rib cages were showing as "thinspiration" and exhorting each other with "You've made a decision—you won't stop. The pain is necessary, especially the pain of hunger. It reassures you that you are strong—can withstand anything—and that you are NOT a slave to your body; you don't give into its whining."

Most dangerously, the Pro-Ana girls were trading practical advice (though the word "practical" is odd in this context):

> You can train yourself to forget hunger by gently punching your stomach every time you get hungry because you'll hurt too bad to eat.

> Take TUMS to help with hunger pains; they have calcium so they'll help in that area also.

> Clean something you find truly disgusting. Afterwards, you won't feel like eating for another couple of hours.

The problem for *YM* wasn't that the bulletin board had failed to get the interest of their readers. The problem was that it had succeeded in a way for which *YM* was unprepared.

Whenever individuals want to find one another, the larger society in which they are embedded can provide or withdraw support for their association. Much of the way we talk about identity assumes it is a personal attribute, but society maintains control over the use of identity as an associational tool. A recovering addict would find it very risky to ask coworkers for

help finding a support group, as might someone looking for the local gay community. Whether society offers or withholds this support, however, matters less with each passing year.

Here is the dilemma the *YM* staff found themselves in. To host a conversation among their most active and engaged readers, they had to monitor the site, but if Erika and the other online editors had weeded out every mention of anorexia, they would come to seem like bullies, especially as some of the conversations were genuinely about avoiding anorexia. Further complicating things, the Pro-Ana girls were willing to go to great lengths to have their discussions out in the open. In the end, the possible sweet spot between too little intervention and too much came to seem illusory, and *YM* simply shut down the conversation, rather than engage in daily censorship or risk having the girls who congregated at *YM* get sick. But what exactly had the girls done that presented such a novel challenge? Anorexia has been a source of public worry since the 1960s, and groups of girls have been hanging out together for decades, talking about everything from sex and drugs to fashion and food. Did *YM* just act on the standard fear that new technology would bring ruin to society? Or was something different?

Something is different. It is easier for groups to form without social approval. Predictably, the Pro-Ana movement has simply moved from hosted conversation spaces like that on *YM* to more open tools like weblogs and social networking sites like MySpace. *YM* was able to withdraw its support for the group on its own site, but neither it nor any other organization could prevent the girls from forming groups and conversing with one another if they wanted to. Before we had any

real group-forming technologies, merely finding people who were interested in the same things was hard, and most of the ways we had for doing so—from putting up flyers around the neighborhood to taking out an ad in the local paper—were expensive and time-consuming. Because of these difficulties, social approval could make group-forming much easier, and social disapproval could make it much harder. Formal mechanisms like the law are one factor: it is easier to find a group of people to drink with than to shoot up with, because the law treats alcohol and heroin differently. But legal strictures account for only a small number of these cases; there are many more informal mechanisms for creating the same effect.

Remember the Mermaid Parade photographers? Or Voice of the Faithful? Or the Ex–Jehovah's Witnesses? All these groups, different as they are in membership, outlook, and goals, share two key characteristics. First, they all started out as latent groups—they had things in common, but the cost and hassle of finding one another was too high. Second, the society they lived in didn't make it easy for them to find one another. In some cases, as with the Mermaid Parade attendees, it was simply because of the old mismatch between effort and outcome. In other cases, though, it was because the institutions best positioned to do the introducing were actively opposed to the goals of the latent group. You could hardly expect the Jehovah's Witnesses or the Catholic Church to spend time or money helping coordinate people who want to criticize them or force them to change their ways of doing business.

Groups like Ex–Jehovah's Witnesses and the Pro-Ana girls

no longer need social support to gather; they all operate under the Coasean floor, where lowered transaction costs have made gathering together so simple that anyone can do it. Recording, searching, and transmitting information, including especially information about ourselves, is something our communications networks are effortlessly good at. The enormous visibility and searchability of social life means that the ability for the like-minded to locate one another, and to assemble and cooperate with one another, now exists independently of social approval or disapproval. The gathering of the Pro-Ana girls isn't a side effect of our social tools, it's an effect of those tools.

When society is changing, we want to know whether the change is good or bad, but that kind of judgment becomes meaningless with transformations this large. It's good that the kids in Belarus now have flash mobs as a tool for opposing political oppression, but for other groups, whether Voice of the Faithful or the passengers demanding better treatment from the airlines, the change looks different depending on where you sit. Loyal Catholics might regard VOTF's demands as a threat to the church they love, and union members may not want the airlines' financial position weakened by the passengers' demands.

Sorting the good from the bad is challenging in part because we're used to social disapproval making it hard for groups to form. Alcoholics Anonymous has more support from society than the Pro-Ana girls, but both groups use the language of self-help to describe what they do. The Pro-Ana movement demonstrates, along with sister movements like Pro-Mia (bulimia) and the Cutters (self-mutilation), that the

definition of self-help has suffered the same blow that journalism has. For much of the twentieth century Alcoholics Anonymous, the premier self-help organization, set the tone for social assumptions about self-help: it was a place of devotion and healing, and it promoted a generally approved goal. The shock of the Pro-Ana movement is that it seems to turn many of those aspects inside out, helping people remain sick or become sicker.

The shock turns out to be misplaced: the Pro-Ana movement is in fact a self-help movement, because the content of a self-help movement is determined by its members. The logic of self-help is affirmational—a small group bands together to defend its values against internal and external challenges. When the small group is a bunch of drunks trying to get sober, against the norms set by their drinking buddies, then society generally approves. When the small group is a bunch of teenage girls trying to get or remain dangerously thin, against the judgment of their horrified parents and friends, then we disapprove. But the basic mechanism of mutual support remains the same.

Falling transaction costs benefit all groups, not just groups we happen to approve of. The thing that kept phenomena like the Pro-Ana movement from spreading earlier was cost. The transaction costs of gathering a group of like-minded individuals, especially in an anonymous fashion, has historically been large, and self-funded and socially approved groups like AA were the only ones that could take on those costs. Once the transaction costs fell, however, the difficulties of putting such groups together disappeared; the potential members of such a group can now gather and set their own goals without needing any sort of social sponsorship or approval.

Three Kinds of Loss

Our new freedoms are not without their problems; it's not a revolution if nobody loses. Improved freedom of assembly is creating three kinds of social loss. The first and most obvious loss is to people whose jobs relied on solving a formerly hard problem. This is the effect felt by media outlets challenged by mass amateurization. The basic problem of copying and distributing information, previously an essential service of the music and newspaper industries among others, is now largely solved thanks to digital networks, undermining the commercial logic of many industries that relied on previous inefficiencies.

Andrew Keen, in *Cult of the Amateur*, describes a firm that ran a $50,000 campaign to solicit user-generated ads. Keen notes that some professional advertising agency therefore missed out on hundreds of thousands of dollars in fees. This loss is obviously a hardship for the ad agency employees, but were they really worth the money in the first place if amateurs working in their spare time can create something the client is satisfied with? The spread of cheap and widely available creative tools is sad for people in the advertising business in the same way that movable type was sad for scribes—the loss from this kind of change is real but limited and is accompanied by a generally beneficial social change.

The second kind of loss will damage current social bargains. Many countries place restrictions on the media in the run-up to elections, but this raises the question of who "the media" is today and what controls should be put on them. Different

countries are coming up with different answers—Singapore banned blogging during the last few weeks before a 2005 election but couldn't control Singaporeans blogging overseas; the Thai government forbade blogging on all political matters, to little effect; and the U.S. election commission decided not even to try to apply its media coverage rules to blogging. The provisional and variable nature of these restrictions suggests that the old relations between the media and the state, even where they are broadly supported by the citizenry, are going to be as impossible to sustain as the old definitions for journalism, which is now less a profession than an activity.

The third kind of loss is the most serious. Networked organizations are more resilient as a result of better communications tools and more flexible social structures, but this is as true of terrorist networks or criminal gangs as of Wikipedians or student protesters. This third loss, where the harms are not merely transitional, leads to a hard question: What are we going to do about the negative effects of freedom? It's easy to tell the newspaper people to quit whining because the writing has been on the wall since the internet became publicly accessible in the early 1990s—their response has been inadequate in part because they waited so long to grapple with the change. It's harder, though, to say what we should be doing about Pro-Ana kids or about newly robust criminal networks.

It used to be hard to get people to assemble and easy for existing groups to fall apart. Now assembling latent groups is simple, and the groups, once assembled, can be quite robust in the face of indifference or even direct opposition from the larger society. (In some cases, that very opposition can *strengthen* the group's cohesion, as with the Pro-Ana girls.)

When it is hard to form groups, both potentially good and bad groups are prevented from forming; when it becomes simple to form groups, we get both the good and bad ones. This is going to force society to shift from simply preventing groups from forming to actively deciding which existing ones to try to oppose, a shift that parallels the publish-then-filter pattern generally.