

# Connecting The World: A Dead Digital Dream?

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'What we are seeing is conversations that are theoretically open to the world but in practice highly restricted' Ethan Zuckerman of Global Voices/Harvard University

Is the Internet a force for development and democracy or is it a digital dead-end? Big questions for just two days at the [Salzburg Global Seminar on media and development](#). There is a lot of healthy scepticism around at the moment fuelled by people like Nicholas Carr, Evgeny Morozov and Malcolm Gladwell.

Some of this is just conservative reaction against specious cyber-utopianism, so it's always more interesting to hear doubts expressed by people like Ethan who has already done wonderful things with the Web.

[Ethan's presentation here](#) cited evidence that people are not talking to each other beyond their own close groups. Black and White Americans on Twitter, for example, often don't share trending topics.

Facebook may be statistically the 'third largest nation' in the world with 500 million users but the average user only has 130 friends that they talk and listen to.

So the idea that the Internet is bringing the world together is what Ethan calls, 'Imaginary Cosmopolitanism'. This is 'Perfectly understandable but with some troublesome complications' he says of this tendency to over-estimate globalisation.

We tend to look at the processes and infrastructure of the Internet. We delight in how Twitter works rather than real content and effects.

If you look at maps of trans-national Internet connections in the blogosphere they tend to mirror mainstream media in their obsession with certain parts of the world. 'Real' News is only a tiny part of the blogosphere where most people are talking about knitting or kittens.

Surprisingly, the US is perhaps more cosmopolitan online than other countries – despite the stereotype of America as an introspective society. Ethan's research shows that consumption of non domestically produced online news pages is higher in the US than the UK for example: US 93.9% UK 95.4% Japan 98.8%

According to Zuckerman there are some major structural practical problems for those who want to see greater cosmopolitanism online:

## 1 Language:

It is impossible to overstate barriers of language . There are 400 million non-English-speaking Chinese internet users and machine translation is largely useless. A group called Yeeyan offers some hope on this. They are a Chinese network who translate English articles into Mandarin, a kind of distributed human translation, run by volunteers who translate articles they care about as part of a larger project. They have 40,000 translators – but there is no comparable project to translate Chinese into English.

## 2. The Paradigm shift on information sources from MSM curation to:

- Search [where you lose serendipity]



- Social [where your friends tell you stuff]

What you need are people like Ushahidi founder Erik Hersman, who is what Ethan calls a 'bridge figures'. These are people who can connect the geeks and the development people or, for example, Africans and Americans.

What we also need, says Ethan Zuckerman, are Xenophiles. People interested in the wider world in novel ways that connect people in different ways to traditional foreign news reporting. It could be sport, culture or economics.

Zuckerman is someone who is doing the right thing. He is conducting research to find out what people do online rather than guessing or citing overall traffic figures. He is also creating projects like Global Voices which seek to provide the content and structures that enable people to understand their world better. But there is a tension here.

On the one hand he wants to strengthen the virtues of traditional international journalism. Authoritative, impartial, concerned, and just a tad elitist (not necessarily a bad thing). He even has a clever idea to provide 'nutritional' information labels for global news sources to signal how trustworthy and international they are. But on the other hand, his own evidence shows that people often connect best when they communicate outside the narrow agendas of mainstream news.

I think the best hope is actually to go with the way the Internet works. Instead of trying to use it to broadcast to everyone about everything Important, we should concentrate on messaging at the margins. Find real connections to link people in different places or with different perspectives – one by one, group by group, place by place.

Of course, how you do that, is very much the subject of Ethan's work and the rest of this two-day global communications conference.

Watch [Ethan's presentation here](#)

Follow the conference on Twitter as #salzburgmedia

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