

Aleks Krotoski: online community – myth, menace and meaning

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Aleks Krotoski

Our online world is frequently celebrated for its ability to make our offline world smaller. It is lauded for encouraging us to bump up against opposing view points. It even gives us the potential for regime change through the motivation of voters and protesters. Yet, the web can also be seen as a menace to society, enabling isolation and fostering extremism. In the first of the [current season of Polis Media Dialogues Dr Aleks Krotoski](#), attempted to reconcile the two perspectives on the Net by looking at how our online interactions can transform our offline behaviour.

This report on her talk by By Danielle Moran

Drawing on her background as a psychologist and technology journalist, Krotoski asked what our life onscreen is doing to our offline existence and offered a mixed pot of surprising, positive and somewhat disturbing answers.

Our online presence, she argued, can be considered as little more than a mirror of our offline life. Just as our offline relationships revolve around social interactions, so our online activity mostly revolves around our connections through social networking, such as our Twitter followers and Facebook friends.

Virtual Water Cooler

The web is often praised for increasing our connectivity to the world, and it can be seen as serving the function of a 'virtual water cooler', a central meeting point for chat, gossip and conversation, which can be accessed at the touch of a button. In this way we can see that our online and offline desires are the same – to 'belong' to a group – and are fulfilled in much the same, sociable way.

Yet the Internet boasts a unique aspect in that anyone, anywhere can contribute at any time, and their musings, arguments and even the level the reach in an online game, is instantly saved and archived for their or our future use. And herein lies the inherent contradiction of the online world; the web provides us with an opportunity for self-actualisation but it also has the power to encourage our isolation and prompt extremism in our behaviour and beliefs.

Weak Ties?

Internet sceptics will raise their shouts of denial at this, arguing that online relationships are ultimately weak, unlike their durable offline counterparts. However online relations can be more honest and open than conventional connections to a best friend, parent or sibling as our laptops can act as a mask, allowing us to express ourselves honestly to comparative strangers.

These enabling factors all add to our levels of social influence. Invoking her psychology background, Krotoski explained that these projections work both ways; while assuming our friends are more like us than they are, we are also influenced to behave more like them or in a way that is more in line with their beliefs than we otherwise would. Clearly, this phenomenon has both positive and negative connotations.

That's not to say that much of our online interaction is not superficial. In fact, the transient nature of online behaviour means that instead of prompting a wave of volunteers fighting for justice in society, Facebook and other social networks have spawned an armchair version of the Prime Minister's 'Big Society', a form of 'click activism'. Although 'liking' Amnesty International on Facebook does help to raise awareness and publicity for the NGO, it doesn't

contribute much to its cash or volunteer bank.

Echo Chambers

And although the web opens the world up to us, its easy to fall into a 'echo chamber'. We can fall victim to the view that our opinions and beliefs are shared by a greater deal of the population than they really are.

We tend to keep up with same-thinking tweets, blogs and Facebook groups, often prompting a shock similar to that experienced by the left-wing blogosphere in the US following the 2004 presidential defeat of John Kerry.

We might feel like we're joining in a global group hug, we may in fact be blocking ourselves off from those we don't agree with, narrowing our focus and isolating ourselves from another side of society.

Dangerous Extremism

Although those who are not involved in our online interests are not as different as we may think, this perception can still lead to isolation and dangerous extremism. Perceptions can be enough to alter our thoughts and behaviour, and the web has the power to escalate the difference between reality and our perception of it.

At the moment there is no way to provide the online opportunities for immediate access to global information, for self-actualisation and the enjoyment of hanging around the virtual water cooler without acknowledging the existence of their dangerous counterparts; isolation and extremism. And if media is indeed for networking, how can traditional journalism forge a role for in the online world?

It appears that journalism, much like those of us perched behind our laptops, must embrace the good presented by the web in a global group hug, be aware of those we simply don't agree with, and be wary of the bad.

This guest-blog is by Polis Intern journalist Danielle Moran

The Polis Media Dialogues feature leading media practitioners and analysts every Tuesday in the New Theatre, Houghton Street at 5pm. [Click Here](#) for details or email us at Polis@lse.ac.uk

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