

The Internet Today

by George Friedman - October 16, 2025

Editor's Note: *In 2017, we published an article titled “The Internet and the Tragedy of the Commons,” which argued that anonymity was destroying our global commons: the internet. Never before has it been so easy for “people to act without shame and to tell lies without fear.” So strongly do we believe in the relevance of that earlier article that we want to reprint it here, where it is most easily accessible, followed by George Friedman’s updated thoughts on the matter.*

The Internet and the Tragedy of the Commons

Jan. 4, 2017

The tragedy of the commons is a concept developed by a British economist in the early 19th century and refreshed by ecologist Garrett Hardin in 1968. They were addressing different issues arising out of the commons, an area that is owned by no one but used by everyone. The commons could be a green space at the center of a town, public land used for agriculture or the atmosphere. The tragedy of the commons is that while many benefit from it, no one is responsible for it. Each person’s indifference has little effect. Everyone’s collective indifference will destroy the commons. The tragedy of the commons is that it is vital, vulnerable and destroyed by the very people who need it.

The internet has become the global commons. This has happened with lightning speed. In this case, the commons is not just one place. It is a collection of places where people meet, discuss the latest news and gossip, play games and perhaps do a little business. The internet, with its complex web of connections and modes of communication, from email to Twitter to Instagram, has had a profound effect on society. There used to be private life and the village green, where public life was lived. There is now private life and the lives we live online. We have lost intimacy but have gained access to a vast world.

Good manners and the desire to be well thought of by your neighbors mitigated the tragedy of the physical commons. Even if you were not motivated to care for the commons, you were motivated to behave properly while using the commons. The incentive did not come from law but a sense of community; the community could censure and shun you if you failed to behave appropriately. Embarrassment and shame were compelling forces that shaped your behavior. What made both possible was that you were known. You would have to live with the consequences of your behavior,

while trying to develop that thing which all humans crave – a good reputation and even being admired. The worst thing, the ultimate punishment of the Greeks, was to be exiled. The commons were still exploited tragically but not wantonly savaged.

The problem with the internet is anonymity and the lack of privacy. This seems contradictory, since anonymity is derived from ultimate privacy, but the internet makes it possible. The world is now discussing whether the Russians hacked into the Democratic National Committee and John Podesta's emails. This has evolved into a matter of geopolitics because the internet has become a battleground in several ways. One way is the constant invasion of privacy by hackers stealing emails and private correspondence. However, there is no way to know for certain who did it. The CIA may know, in rare circumstances, or may claim to know for political reasons. In general, it is difficult to find out who is violating your privacy and stealing your property.

Anonymity has another effect. On the village commons, everyone knows who you are and you are held responsible for what you say. On the global commons, you cannot be held responsible for what you say, because your identity is masked. The internet was created to function that way, less on purpose than by technical default. The consequence is that the most powerful human emotions, shame and the desire to be well thought of, don't restrain what you say. False news has become a topic of discussion recently. False news has always existed, but it was readily distinguishable from reliable news by where it was published. An article from an unknown source was suspect. An article in the mainstream media was more respected.

Mainstream media outlets used to be the arbiters of the commons and their opinions meant something. They were respected for their banker-like primness. Their right to judge other sources of news was rooted in their meticulous fairness and visible objectivity. It is said that complete objectivity is impossible. That is likely true. But perfect love is also impossible. The lack of perfection does not excuse you from making your best efforts.

In a recent poll by the Pew Research Center, only 5 percent of Americans surveyed said that they had a great deal of confidence in the news media. This is a stunningly low number, but it is not a new phenomenon. What is striking is that this consistent lack of confidence in the media hasn't created an uproar in newsrooms. I doubt that many reporters at The New York Times or The Washington Post voted for President-elect Donald Trump. That is fine, so long as the newspapers maintain rigorous objectivity. I am sure that the staff of both papers think they do, and it is likely that their friends, who share their views, also feel that way. But the majority of the public has its doubts. Therefore, in the public's mind, these media outlets have given up their role as overseer of the commons of public

discourse.

The anonymity of the web allows people to act without shame and to tell lies without fear. I would urge everyone not to believe that this behavior only comes from people on the right. During the George W. Bush administration, I read many preposterous claims about him from people who appeared to be liberals. These kind of claims were also made by their right-wing friends. There is no accountability for what people say or do, no shame attached. Therefore, lies flourish, despicable charges are made, and some on each side are free to believe what they want to believe. The promise that the internet would create a democratic commons where all can be heard and the media loses the right to censor has been achieved. Censors and accountability no longer exist. Twitter is the place where malicious people with time on their hands can tell lies.

But in reality, the internet has not become more democratic. More fastidious citizens no longer visit the commons, or if they do, only to speak to those they know. It is increasingly the place of the marginal. It is interesting how the mainstream media has used Twitter to gain a sense of public opinion. I frequently wonder if the person from Twitter being quoted in a news story is a 12-year-old whose medications are no longer effective. The media doesn't know. There are still worthwhile conversations to be had there, but many people now becoming less engaged.

The internet is a place with two problems, both masked. Some use it to steal private information and correspondence. Some use it to spew venom through the promise of anonymity. They are both destroying the global commons that had so much hope, in the same way that the village commons would be destroyed if it were invaded by people wearing masks, stealing people's diaries and money and shouting obscene improbabilities. The tragedy of the commons today is not indifferent exploitation. The tragedy of the commons is that it can be dominated by criminals and those harassing others who want a civil conversation. It reminds me of Central Park in New York in the 1970s. Anyone who was there after dark was a mugger or crazy.

The right to privacy is an absolute, and in due course, as thieves keep breaking into people's property (why thieves sometimes are called hackers is beyond me), we will simply return to older modes of communication. Perhaps phone calls and handwritten letters will be resurrected. Far better than having your secrets arrayed in public. But still, banks and companies like Geopolitical Futures have to do their business online, and the threat from criminals who can't be identified is great.

But a greater problem is the media. The prestige press, as we used to call it, squandered its inheritance from prior generations of journalists and lost its right to pronounce the truth. Social media is now subject to Gresham's Law: Bad ideas will drive out good ones. This can't go on.

The first principle has to be to make masks illegal on the internet. Many countries and U.S. states have laws against wearing masks in public. In the United States, many of these laws were passed to stop the terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan, knowing that only anonymity and a large crowd made its members brave. But other countries passed similar laws on the reasonable assumption that someone hiding his face is up to no good. In the end, it came down to this: If you want to be in public, you must show your face. You have a right to privacy in your home and on your property. You don't have a right to privacy when you choose to go into public spaces.

The problem is technical. Today's computers descended without dramatic change from those available 20 years ago. The internet got larger with more bandwidth but is still as primitive as when it was first designed for a small group of scientists wanting to share information. The security that exists today consists of complex add-ons that require sophisticated managers, and they still can be broken into. Security can't be an add-on. It has to be at the heart of the system, and its first requirement should be to eliminate anonymity, so that criminals can be identified and so that the vile will know shame.

The reason I am writing on this topic is that we are facing **an international confrontation between Russia and the U.S. over whether Russia stole emails to help Trump become president**. Some also claim that the Russians penetrated the U.S. power grid. The problem with this issue is quite simply that the system is so primitive that proving the Russians are responsible is impossible. An entity can penetrate a critical system like the power grid without anyone knowing who did it.

The situation is getting out of hand. The internet has become not just the commons for private individuals but the business and government center of the world. Therefore, some limits need to be put in place. Hiding your identity already is illegal in certain circumstances. You must provide ID to buy alcohol or get on a plane. I expect privacy in my home, but when I go into the world, I want assurance that the people out there don't mean me harm. The design of the internet denies me that. The arbiters of propriety have themselves collapsed. Crazy people are making insane charges in public. This has to stop.

It is in the interest of the tech community to do something about this issue because if thieves run loose and social media is dominated by sociopaths, people will treat the internet like they did Central Park. And if the tech community believes that it is so dependent on internet privacy that it can't budge on this issue, then it is as deluded as the major media has been. Someone broke into the power grid and we don't know who. Enough is enough. Wars have been started over less.

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I want to address the question of the internet today, which has become a profound problem within societies and their politics. It is also a problem geopolitically. Nations use the internet to manipulate public opinion in other countries, whether to force a shift in their foreign policies or to generate internal tensions that weaken national solidarity and, thus, weaken nations. In doing this, I am taking a step I rarely take and sending you an article that I published in 2017 on the internet and the tragedy of the commons. The article describes the dangers of the internet and the underlying force that makes it dangerous. I want not to repeat myself but rather to pose a solution.

On Monday, I sent the final draft of my new book to my publisher. This is always a dreaded moment for an author. Having spent years writing this book, which I have titled “Geopolitics and the Moon” (though the publisher may change the title), I now await the judgment of my editor. This is the sixth book I have sent to this publisher and this editor. In doing this, I face the possibility that he will find it worthless, and the certainty that he will demand changes. In due course, after hoped-for publication, I will dread the reviewers’ responses as well as the public’s comments. It is not a matter of sales, but my pride and reputation are at stake.

An author is forced, by the nature of the craft, to devote years to a book and to have his name emblazoned on it. In my first book back in 1991, “The Coming War with Japan,” I made a profound error in my thinking and writing, and the result was very widely read, and utterly embarrassing. One of the most powerful forces shaping human action is shame – the shame of failure or being viewed as unworthy. That experience drove me to think more clearly and less confidently. My name was on that book, and at times, I still must listen to comments and feel ashamed.

The fundamental problem of the internet is anonymity. You cannot identify the author. Therefore, there is no shame, no consequences for pride or social standing, and so people are free to behave like children when they think their parents aren’t watching. Children who act out are chastised and learn from that. It shapes their life because it shapes how their parents will think of them, or so the child thinks.

Anonymity undermines the foundation of human decency: the fear of being held in contempt. It frees humans to expose the vile dimensions that are within us all. In a normal human interaction, we might engage a small group that knows us and whose approval we crave. But on the internet, we are able to express things that in civilized places would render us despised and outcast. Even more, the internet allows the vile to come together and form pseudo-communities of vileness.

When I publish a book, my name is on it, along with the names of my editor and publisher. We must all live with the consequences of what I say, and what my editor allowed me to say, and what the publisher allowed to be published. There are consequences for being careless or in error, and certainly for being vile.

The internet is said to be different. But in essence, it is not. There is a publisher, the company that operates the internet. Publishers have the obligation and the need not to publish things that they regard as vile. Publishers also have the need to make money. But in the case of the many platforms on the internet, they have created a publishing company that takes no responsibility for what is said and provides no editor, and forums in which there are no consequences for authors.

The doctrine of free speech is, to me, a political absolute. The Constitution did not want the government to censor anyone. But it was, I think, assumed that with speech comes social consequences, perhaps even being ostracized by friends and family. Government should not control speech, but society would.

The internet cannot defend itself on the basis of free speech because it has violated the core principle behind free speech: consequences, specifically shame and social ostracism. The internet destroys the social reality that had been the balance to free speech – an imperfect one, to be sure, but still a powerful one. If no one – publishers (the company that created the technology and the manager of the website), editors, friends or family – can impose sanctions on me for what I say online, then it undermines the viability of the constitutional principle that the state may not regulate my speech.

The problem of the internet could easily be solved if the owners of the internet made it necessary for you to identify yourself in some way (a driver's license perhaps) and use your full name rather than hide behind a masked identity. The Constitution would be satisfied, and the communal norms and consequences to some extent restored. We humans have long been forced to say things within the hearing of people who will judge us. Factions formed, of course, and individuals could present themselves as they chose. But good or bad, there would be consequences for what you said and what faction you belonged to. Freedom from the state is one thing. The right to anonymity is another.

My other article is about what happens when everyone is free from social limits and consequences. It is soluble, but the technologists who created the internet are publishing companies making money from its authors. In the process, they are undermining the social controls that are expected to shape and limit publishing and public speaking.

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