

Title: *republic.com*

Author: Cass Sunstein

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Who ever thought mainstream media and Channel 5 news might be the glue holding this precious republic together? In *republic.com*, Professor Cass Sunstein makes a valid, albeit speculative argument for this proposition. Those of you who think the onslaught of information from the Internet is the greatest thing since the card catalog should check out the 212 page paperback written by the Karl N. Llewellyn Distinguished Service Professor of Jurisprudence at the University of Chicago Law School and Department of Political Science. It might surprise you a little, what's more, it might even persuade you.

Sunstein writes about a time in the not so distant future where citizens reading personalized newspapers will be the norm. For example, if someone is interested in the Republican Party, but is a social libertarian who likes the Boston Red Sox, then their paper will contain information about those topics, and others closely related. No longer will this person have to sift through the whole paper, or listen to the entire news broadcast for that one interesting editorial or news blurb.

This is a phenomenon Sunstein calls the "Daily Me," and speculates that it is possible, even probable, but also potentially detrimental to the republic. Ultimately, the "Daily Me" is accomplished through excessive Internet filtering. Some possible effects of this constant filtering are group polarization, fragmentation, and xenophobic behavior.

Most people would probably think the "Daily Me" sounds great. On the contrary, Sunstein, in *republic.com*, argues that everyone will actually benefit from reading editorials written by a Democrat, third party, or even the editorials about the New York Yankees.

The root of the problem, in the author's opinion, is equating consumers to citizens. When citizens act as a group they are able to solve large long-term problems, but if we promote a communications network driven by consumer choice, we are no longer acting as citizens; rather we are consumers with short-term goals. Sunstein, citing Brandeis's greatest free speech opinion, argues that one of the greatest threats to freedom are "inert people," who choose to have no public discussion.

Sunstein validly points out that citizens have a duty to be active. He accomplishes this not only through the words of Brandies and Holmes, but also by quoting Benjamin Franklin. When the founding father was asked by a citizen what they (the founding fathers) had "given" to the American public, he responded, "A republic, if you can keep it." Our republic once again faces a trying time, being active citizens and heeding Franklin's words would benefit everyone.

The author is speculating on the future, and although he does make a persuasive argument about the "Daily Me", he does not support it with outside evidence, and his theory remains untested. One reason for this is the fact the Internet is still so new, and nobody really understands the long-term effects of living one's life "online."

Sunstein coins the term "cybercascade" in *republic.com*. He argues that information can flow almost instantaneously in the wrong direction. One notable example is a website in South Africa devoted to spreading misinformation about a non-existent link between HIV and AIDS. Sunstein notes how hate groups and other potentially dangerous organizations can influence large numbers of people through such cybercascades, cautioning how misinformation can detrimentally influence large groups of people.

Those who believe government regulation of the media and Internet is a bad thing should read *republic.com*. Sunstein convincingly argues that without proper government regulation, the

Internet would be in chaos. Furthermore, he notes that the Supreme Court has already regulated the Internet via First Amendment commercial speech decisions.

The author does not give a detailed analysis of the First Amendment or the free speech doctrine. Rather, Sunstein chooses to give some examples of how free speech is regulated, and ultimately points to a not so known fact: the First Amendment is not an absolute. This section, with a bit more explanation might further assist the reader. Those interested in a Constitutional dissertation of the First Amendment would need to consult a secondary source. Fortunately, Sunstein offers detailed endnotes, which correspond to each chapter of *republic.com*.

Sunstein does offer proposals to amend many potential problems; such as mandatory disclosure or “must carry” websites. His most notable suggestion is Public.Net, a hypothetical icon that would exist on every person’s desktop, coined by Andrew Shapiro. Every person would have access to this website (likewise they would be able to drag it to the recycle bin), where one could discuss the days events or a myriad of topics one might be interested in. The active citizen would dictate the limits of this site.

This proposal is intriguing, but would most likely get bogged down in governmental bureaucracy were it ever put to the test. Sunstein advises that any system controlled by the government brings with it a multitude of such problems. He suggests some sort of commingling with non-profit and non-governmental organizations to solve them.

The most recent copy of *republic.com* contains a new afterword. Sunstein stresses a point mentioned in the book: that the Internet is one of the greatest technological booms in history. He sees enormous potential for the Internet, and suggests that overall it is good for democracy. On the other hand, Sunstein cautions to approach the Internet with skepticism. The influx of the “Daily Me” is harmful to a republic, which must remain active. Most important,

Sunstein does not want people to forget that “inert” people are dangerous, and citizens of this republic have a duty to actively work at keeping the republic given to them.

I would recommend this book to just about anyone, but for those interested in how technology has or will change our society, it is a must read. Most will probably not completely agree with Sunstein, and this is to be expected. What readers will hopefully take from this book is a better understanding of the active role citizens must take to maintain our still fledgling republic.