

Journalists in Meacham's collection can only stand on the sideline and report. Their problem is that they are forced to write in the third person. And while some of their journalistic insights are rich, they are overmatched by even the weakest personal story.

The title of this book, *Voices in Our Blood*, suggests that Meacham is after those stories that are so personal that they are not measured by any universal standard of truth but by naked honesty. The book's title comes from a line in Robert Penn Warren's book, *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South*. Warren wrote that when he went south in 1956 to look at the nation's racial crisis, he was going to "hear the voices, to hear, in fact, the voices in my blood." No outside observer can capture what boils in your blood. It is personal, often unsaid for fear of embarrassment. This is the essence of race relations, and it is also the true heart of this valuable collection of writings.

JUAN WILLIAMS is the host of National Public Radio's "Talk of the Nation" and author of "Thurgood Marshall: American Revolutionary."

Techno-tribalists

By Paul M. Barrett

CASS SUNSTEIN WOULD PREFER that we define the higher purposes of free speech in a digital-age republic based on the aspirations of Louis Brandeis, rather than those of Bill Gates.

The playful comparison is, of course, unfair to the Microsoft chairman, whom nobody, perhaps other than Gates himself, would consider a serious political or social thinker—let alone one on the level of Justice Brandeis. Still, the contrast helps clarify how online technology may bolster or corrode democracy. And to even the sides a bit, Sunstein suggests that Gates has an ally in Oliver Wendell Holmes, no less.

In 214 very small pages, Sunstein persuasively warns that the Internet's capacity to serve up only what users order in advance could debilitate the clash of ideas critical to informed self-government. A remarkably prolific constitutional scholar at the University of Chicago, Sunstein has made a life's work of proposing and refining pragmatic liberal policies he contends will strength-

en "deliberative democracy." This book will disappoint readers hoping for fully conceived solutions to the problems he identifies in the cyberworld. But his provocative admonition to beware absolutist defenses of free speech online deserves attention, especially as the federal government continues to consider how to regulate the Internet.

To get things started, Sunstein offers several versions of the function that communication ought to play in society. Gates heralds a digital age in which the highest purpose of Internet communication is quickly satisfying consumers' customized desires. Getting exactly what you want—be it pet food, political news, video games, financial services, movies, medical information or chat room conversation—makes for a fulfilled life, according to this view. Gates dreams of a day when you can settle into the living room couch and tell your Internet-connected television, "I'm never interested in this, but I am particularly interested in that." The screen will select only the entertainment or purchasing opportunities you already know you want. Surfing channels? A waste of time. Don't even ask about newspapers or magazines. Traditional publications that offer readers a range of subject matter and opinions have no place in the Gatesian future. "For your own daily dose of news, you might subscribe to several review services and let a software agent

or a human one pick and choose from them to compile your completely customized 'newspaper,'" Gates wrote in 1995. "These subscription services, whether human or electronic, will gather information that conforms to a particular philosophy and set of interests."

Sunstein mourns how close we are to achieving Gates' dream. Internet services already allow millions of users to filter out all they find distracting so they can focus exclusively on their personalized slice of reality. The network-television news, the general-interest newspaper, and

the weekly newsmagazine are decreasingly people's primary sources of information in the Internet era. These institutions, with all their flaws, at least created the possibility that citizens would encounter reports of unexpected views, unfamiliar events, and experiences different from their own, Sunstein argues. In place of the metaphoric newsstand, where engaged citizens have to buy bundles of varied information, he maintains, the Internet offers a virtual shopping mall, where consumers are urged to acquire only the data they know they want. Communication online promotes mere "consumer sovereignty," as opposed to popular political sovereignty, which ought to be the core value of free expression protected by the First Amendment, Sunstein asserts.

The author notes that in discussions of free speech, Bill Gates and other con-

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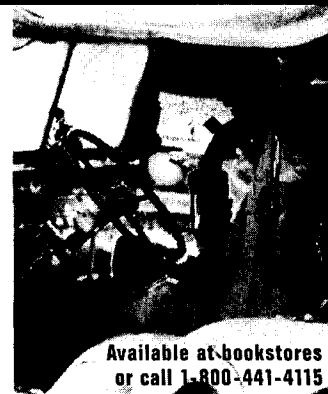
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sumer-sovereignty advocates actually walk in the footsteps of the great Justice Holmes. In his famous dissenting opinions defending free speech in the early part of the twentieth century, Holmes depicted expression as part of a political market. "Free trade in ideas," Holmes wrote, would allow truth to emerge.

Sunstein finds the Holmesian view lacking in its assumption that the invisible hand alone will reveal what people need to know to govern themselves. You have to go out and actively look for the truth, and sometimes you may not know what you're looking for, the professor suggests. Justice Brandeis, who often joined Holmes in defending political dissent, nevertheless spoke in quite different terms, Sunstein observes. Eschewing the marketplace metaphor, Brandeis insisted that debate of public issues is not only a right, but "a political duty"—a notion foreign to Holmes. "The greatest menace to freedom is an inert people," according to Brandeis. He saw "self-government as something dramatically different from an exercise in consumer sovereignty," Sunstein writes approvingly. "This does not mean that people have to be thinking about public affairs all or most of the time. But it does mean that each of us has rights and duties as citizens, not simply as consumers."

The Internet, to be sure, encourages dissemination of ideas, and the Web's get-only-what-you-want mentality may work for selling books or cosmetics. But when this mindset shapes communication about public issues, the Internet encourages users to consume only opinions and information with which they are comfortable: Gun foes go to antigun Web sites; gun fans, to National Rifle Association sites. Feminists talk to feminists; right-to-lifers, to right-to-lifers.

Sunstein presents fascinating empirical research on how few Web sites provide links to sites of contrasting views. Instead, Internet partisans tend to collect and regurgitate "facts" from likeminded partisans, contributing to what Sunstein calls "cybercascades" of dubious information. One such cascade has helped fuel the widespread belief that abandoned hazardous-waste dumps rank among the worst environmental problems, the author writes. In fact, hard science doesn't support that conclusion.

Another cascade has strengthened the fallacious and dangerous belief that HIV doesn't cause AIDS. Hate groups, some violent, have embraced the Internet as an efficient means to rally troops against racial minorities, Jews, homosexuals, and abortion providers.

We have always been able to seek out those who share our assumptions and ignore ideas we don't like. But the Internet's ability to filter information instantaneously makes the sifting process so much more effective that we are in danger of transforming ourselves into a society of egocentric techno-tribalists, Sunstein warns. Healthy democracy depends on citizens sharing experiences and exposing themselves to topics and ideas they wouldn't have chosen in advance. Lord knows, as a former staff member of this magazine and a loyal longtime employee of a dinosaur newspaper, I agree with Sunstein. So, what are we to do about all this?

The author admits that he doesn't really have an elaborate answer. His highly tentative suggestions include government subsidies for a Web analogue to the taxpayer-supported Public Broadcasting Service. He also backs the establishment, perhaps with government support, of Web sites where people of diverse views could discuss the issues of the day. Without favoring particular political content, government could require public-affairs Web sites to carry links to other sites offering contrasting views, Sunstein suggests.

Anticipating inevitable protests that government shouldn't regulate or otherwise get involved in the Internet, Sunstein skillfully illustrates that the government already regulates the Internet in numerous ways. The Federal Bureau of Investigation enforces anti-hacking laws, and the federal courts protect site owners' property by upholding copyright statutes, to name just two examples. The debate, Sunstein argues, should be over how government ought to regulate the Internet, not whether any regulation is permissible.

All of this sounds right to me. But I fear that even if absolutist First Amendment attacks on Internet regulation were overcome, Sunstein's innovations would attract the attention of an audience no larger than that which still reads high-quality newspapers, subscribes to maga-

zines like *The Washington Monthly*, and watches PBS programs. Maybe that would be an impressive accomplishment: to transfer the existing, although shrinking, constituency for serious discussion of public affairs from the old media to the new. But eventually, sad to say, we'll die off. Will members of younger generations, raised from childhood in the Internet culture of instant consumer gratification, click on Prof. Sunstein's government-aided deliberativedemocracy.com? Maybe—if some old fogey has given them a copy of this book.

PAUL M. BARRETT is a senior editor with *The Wall Street Journal*. Many years ago, he spent a semester as a student of Cass Sunstein's.

Valley of the Dollars

By Michael Oreskes

DRAMATIC ECONOMIC CHANGE—the move from farm to city, or from blue collar to white—has, generally speaking, been followed by substantial political realignment. Sara Miles sets herself no less a task than documenting such a realignment from the heartland of the "New Economy," Silicon Valley. Miles, a writer for *Wired* and other magazines, chooses as her focal point the efforts of Wade Randlett to raise money and organize support for Democrats among the Valley's venture capitalists, engineers, and entrepreneurs.

It is an intriguing idea, and there is much interesting material in this book as Miles escorts us through the anthropology of first contact between the alien cultures of cyberspace and the Beltway.

"Fifty years from now, Silicon Valley will be more powerful than Washington, but people in Washington don't see it yet," the head of a software firm confides to her. The hubris is breathtaking, and well-recorded by Miles. This ignorance and naiveté about government and politics gives another meaning to digital divide. At one point, Rep. Anna Eshoo of California's fourteenth district is touring Synopsys, a software firm, and is offered a briefing on how the firm's product automates chip-making:

"We've replaced RTL code with behavioral compilers," began a 28-year-old engineer named Tony Dimalanta,