

Neither an Optimist nor a Pessimist Be Douglas Schuler

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Far from the public eye, a battle is raging.

The battle is being waged over abstractions but it touches our hearts and, perhaps more importantly, our minds. And although it's a battle with consequences, it's a battle that really shouldn't be fought at all.

The battle I'm referring to is the one between the Optimists and the Pessimists.

On one side are the optimists. They believe that in spite of everything things are getting better. The pessimists, as everybody knows, believe that things are inevitably getting worse.

Although I've been accused of being one or the other of them on various occasions, I'm not a member of either camp. In fact because both sides are wrong, I hope they both lose.

The two views are strangely similar. Both views make wild, unprovable claims. Both views are simplistic. And both demonstrate fatal forms of intellectual blindness: *Optimists refuse to see the challenges; pessimists won't acknowledge the opportunities.*

Ironically it's the point that both sides agree on that's the most dangerous: *that historical momentum makes human effort unnecessary.* Both views imply an inevitability that is not only inaccurate but paralyzing. In short, they offer excuses that many people are consciously or subconsciously looking for, reasons for not getting involved.

But, with apologies to Shakespeare, *if neither an optimist nor a pessimist be*, who or what *should* we be? Is there a word for a better way to think about the future?

Luckily such a word exists. The word is *meliorism*.

Admittedly the word is a bit obscure. But it needs to be rescued from its obscurity. And it needs to be the last idea standing after optimism and pessimism have been retired from rhetorical service.

Meliorism is the belief that the world can be made better by human effort. (But note that the flip side — that human effort can make the world *worse* — is also true.) And also note that that operative word is *can*. Unfortunately, unlike the virtual guarantees afforded by optimism and pessimism, meliorism focuses on the difficult challenges that we face, not on a fruitless debate.

But what does all of this have to do with the evolution of the Internet?

Plenty.

For one thing the internet inspired the optimists to some of the greatest rhetorical heights of all times. The optimists convinced many people that a golden age was imminent. The governed would achieve parity with the governors. Knowledge would flow equally to all and education would be transformed. The *wisdom of crowds* would rule the land. And censorship was impossible because information *wants to be free*.

On the other hand, cynical utopia deniers — dour pessimists — continued to assert that things will *always* be unequal, the Internet will change nothing at all, and that the human race will never develop the civic intelligence that it needs — Internet or no Internet.

But little by little people are breaking free of the optimism / pessimism trap. They are realizing the Internet is not magic after all. They are learning that it's not immune to the forces that created the commercial television or radio we know today.

The fact remains that the Internet represents an extremely rare opportunity. For one thing, it's a meta-medium that can assume many shapes. Because it's becoming a tool that billions of people use, it *could* help people of the world work together to address their shared concerns. The "coulds" could be multiplied *ad infinitum*: the Internet *could* be used to help mediate discussions between adversaries; it *could* be used to develop solutions to problems of environmental degradation, oppression and intolerance, and violence. It *could* ...

Another critical question surfaces in relation to these issues. Is there a role for business in building the information and communication infrastructure that promotes the civic intelligence that the world needs? And if not, why not?

Unfortunately the standard rules might not apply. For one thing, who is interested in building capabilities for people with few economic resources? And while the costs of despotism and anarchy are high indeed, democracy has no immediate ROI. And would venture capitalists bother with ventures with dubious aims like developing social imagination or improving collective problem-solving capabilities?

Clearly people in business can be counted on for innovation for economic gain. My presumption is that they could retool themselves intellectually for *social* innovation as well.

Meliorism, unlike optimism or pessimism, doesn't allow us to wriggle out of our responsibilities. In the case of the Internet, meliorism compels us to imagine what the Internet *could* be and to work for those *possible* outcomes.

We have the imagination and the resources to build the Internet that the utopians may have envisioned and the dystopians swore we'd never see. It will take the meliorists who have gotten tired of the silly debate over optimism and pessimism to roll up their sleeves and actually make it happen.