

out of awareness that the weapons of cyberwarfare are very different from conventional ones, producing systemic effects that can be hard to anticipate. Planners considering an attack on the Iraqi banking system before the 2003 U.S.-led invasion backed off when they realized that the Iraqi networks were tied to ones in France that would also be affected. Moreover, the computer coding used in any assault is at

risk of being captured by an adversary, refined, and redeployed. Mike McConnell, a former director of national intelligence, has said that a coordinated cyberattack “could create damage as potentially great as a nuclear weapon over time.”

Old-fashioned Cold War-style deterrence theory plays a big role in the new thinking. Harris writes, “Presumably, China has no interest in crippling Wall Street, be-

cause it owns much of it. Russia should be reluctant to launch a cyberattack on the United States because, unlike Estonia or Georgia [which Russia is believed to have cyber-attacked in 2007 and 2008, respectively], the United States could fashion a response involving massive conventional force. . . . If nations begin attacking one another’s power grids and banks, they will quickly exchange bombs and bullets.”

SOCIETY

Good Vibrations

THE SOURCE: “Effects of Internet Commerce on Social Trust” by Diana C. Mutz, in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Fall 2009.

HARDLY A DAY GOES BY WITHOUT some headline declaring a new ill the Internet is visiting upon society. One oft-heard lament: Local shopkeepers are losing business to online retailers, and as a result, small interactions that once strengthened the social fabric of a neighborhood or town are no more. Is the Internet eroding the connections that keep society together?

Not at all, writes Diana C. Mutz, a political scientist at the University of Pennsylvania. Face-to-face interactions may be on the wane, but positive e-commerce experiences (and 80 percent of those who have purchased online characterize their

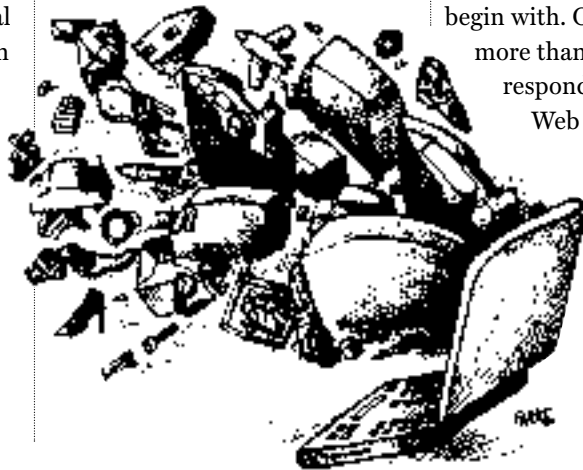
experience positively) tend to boost a generalized sense of faith in other people, particularly strangers.

Earlier studies have established that people who are more trusting are more likely to participate in e-commerce in the first place. And Mutz finds that when they do so and have a positive experience, they become even

more trusting. In a carefully crafted experiment, she tested the effects of good and bad online shopping experiences on people who had never bought anything on the Web before. Those whose packages arrived promptly and without hassle answered positively to survey questions about strangers’ honesty and helpfulness, and human nature’s essential goodness. Those who received broken goods and then poor customer service experienced a sharp drop in warm and fuzzy feelings toward their fellow man.

In general, people are not very trusting of online merchants to begin with. One study found that more than 60 percent of respondents believed that

Web businesses were likely to try to cheat them, while only 21 percent said the same of local shops. What’s more, many more people believed that online businesses could



get away with scamming their customers. Mutz suspects that it is this initial sense of apprehension followed by the pleasant surprise of an honest transaction that builds trust. When e-commerce becomes a more routine form of shopping (much as catalogs are today), no one will be surprised when an order arrives on time and as advertised, and the positive effects on general trust will diminish.

Of course, businesses act honestly because it's in their self-interest to do so, not out of

altruism. Mutz writes, "By engaging in economic transactions with those we do not know and probably will never meet, we enhance our faith in the general goodness of others. . . . Thus good business practices have important ramifications for the long-term well-being of societies."

SOCIETY

Don't Cry for Eyak

THE SOURCE: "The Cosmopolitan Tongue: The Universality of English" by John McWhorter, in *World Affairs Journal*, Fall 2009.

IN 2008, THE LAST NATIVE speaker of Eyak died in southern Alaska. Her death, and that of her mother tongue, was the subject of international news media attention. Observers mourned the loss of another indigenous

EXCERPT

Twain's World

Perhaps you will believe with me that civilizations are not realities, but only dreams; dreams of the mind, not of the heart, and therefore fictitious, and perishable; that they have never affected the heart and therefore have made no valuable progress; that the heart remains today what it always was, as intimacy with any existing savage tribe will show. Indeed the average human brain is not a shade higher today than it was in Egyptian times 10,000 years ago.

—MARK TWAIN, in a letter to Carl Thalbitzer, who had asked Twain to write about "the advantages and drawbacks of civilization," in *Harper's* (Dec. 2009)

language, one of thousands that are expected to meet the same fate in the next 100 years.

Get over it, says Columbia University linguist John McWhorter. The passing of these languages is not as meaningful as some think, and strenuous efforts to keep them alive are unlikely to succeed.

A small but vocal number of people have romantic notions about the unique "cultural worldview" an individual language represents. But language differences have more to do with geography than culture. The fact that the Latin *augustus* became *agosto* in Spain and *août* in France is merely one of the many "chance linguistic driftings" with no cultural significance that separate languages. And elements of a culture often remain intact long after the death of an indigenous language. "Native

American groups would bristle at the idea that they are no longer meaningfully 'Indian' simply because they no longer speak their ancestral tongue," McWhorter points out.

There is undeniably an aesthetic loss when a language dies, but it is meaningful to relatively few people. Technology allows us to record and preserve the clicks, whistles, and trills of obscure languages that delight linguists (and frustrate students). Ultimately, language death is "a symptom of people coming together," with all the

good things that entails: economic opportunity, shared space, and the exchange of ideas. Indigenous languages survive only in isolation, "complete with the maltreatment of women and lack of access to modern medicine and technology." When given the opportunity, these languages' users often voluntarily abandon their own ways in pursuit of a better life.

A hundred years from now the world could have as few as 600 living languages, with English serving as the "global tongue." As someone who has learned more than a few languages himself, McWhorter says the world could do much worse than English. Unlike, say, Czech, English has no sounds that a non-native can't closely approximate; nor does it require three genders, as Russian does, or the memorization of immense numbers of characters,