Digital Citizenship, Safety and Hygiene
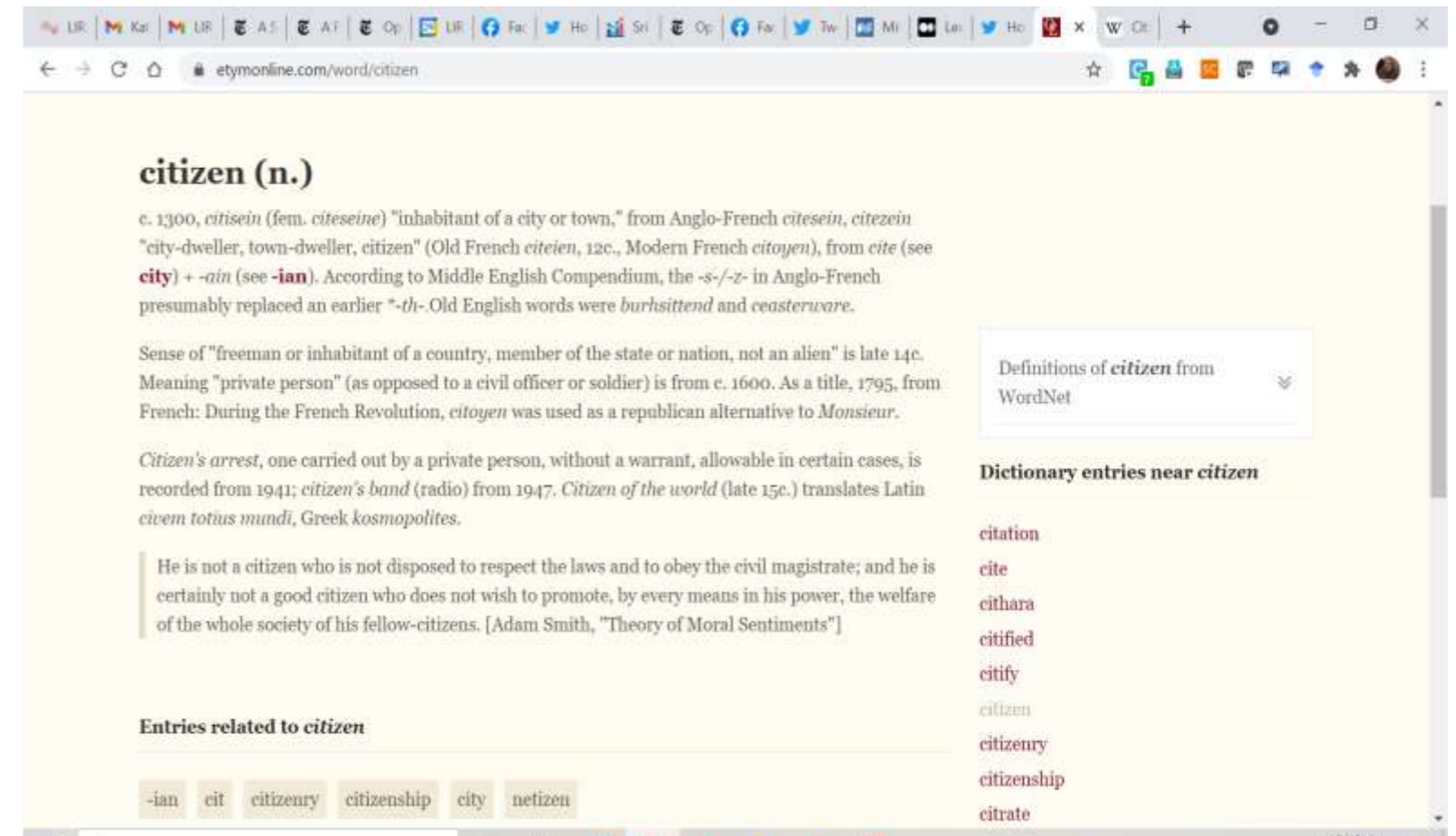
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Is citizenship in cyberspace any different from what it is in "meatspace"?

- Both Sinhala and English roots link citizenship to cities: to living in close proximity to one another, with the actions of one impacting on the lives of others
  - Think fire safety, waste disposal, infectious diseases ➔ negative externalities
  - Think how home values are affected by the aesthetics of a street, the beauty and upkeep of nearby houses, etc. ➔ positive externalities

Is cyberspace any different? Do our actions on the Internet affect the lives of others?

- The pain of being bullied is no different whether it occurs in a school yard or on social media

- Beyond direct impact, externalities
  - Does trolling in a group affect only the person being attacked?
  - Have the quality of the comments turned you off certain news sites?

- If yes, the obligations of citizenship extend to cyberspace
  - Obligations to each other
  - Obligations to the State

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What's different about cyberspace?

- Transaction costs are lower
  - Compare transmission of rumors over the fence in a village versus in social media
- Constraints of civility (root is citizen) are relaxed because of
  - Absence of immediate facial and verbal responses
  - Dopamine hit from "likes" on social media ➔ incentives to be extreme
- Bridges time and space
  - Difficult to limit effects to a region/country
  - What is said/shown today does not disappear; but can be seen months/years later

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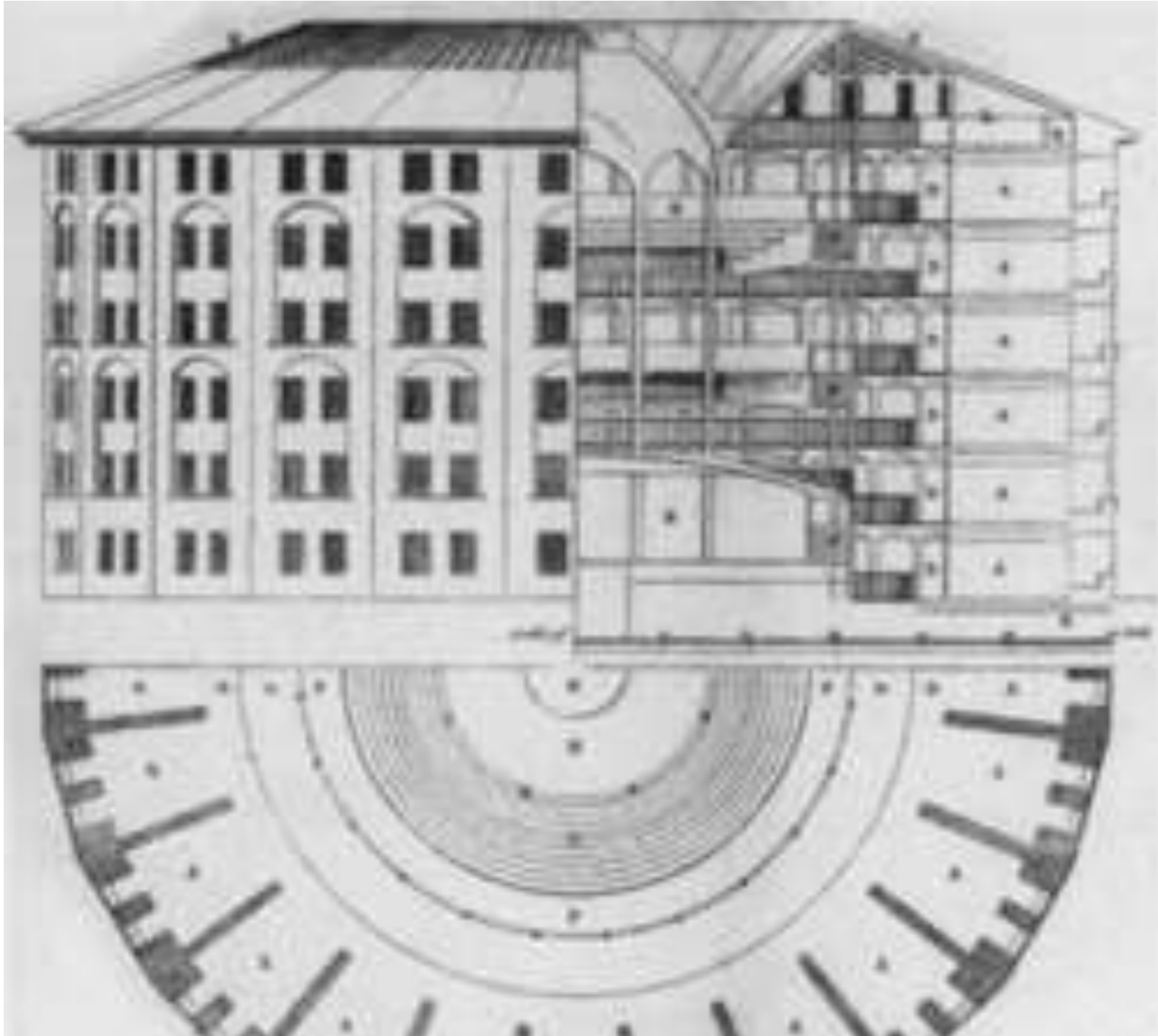
What can be done?

By citizens themselves

- Set and enforce codes of civility in the communities they belong to, e.g.,
    - Quickly call out bad behavior
    - Threaten to leave a WhatsApp group; then leave
    - Expel bad actors, if possible
- Any different from what happens in meatspace?

By the State, on behalf of citizens

- Support digital literacy programs that try to build civility
    - Tough job, given meatspace civility evolved over millennia
- Create a backstop, through law, to deter egregiously bad behavior
    - Avoiding actions that are actually about protecting the State against dissent, and do not violate fundamental rights recognized in the Constitution

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Encouraging civility should be the goal, while deterring bad behavior & minimizing damage

- No State, however powerful, can micro-manage the day-to-day behaviors of millions
  - Half the population will be watching the other half
  - The trick is voluntary compliance
    - People actually buying in to the values on which the desired behaviors are based
    - People thinking they are being watched, though the watching and punishment is probabilistic (Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon)

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We need to strive for a safe, but not overly policed, cyberspace

- **How to get the balance between safety and freedom is the question**

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