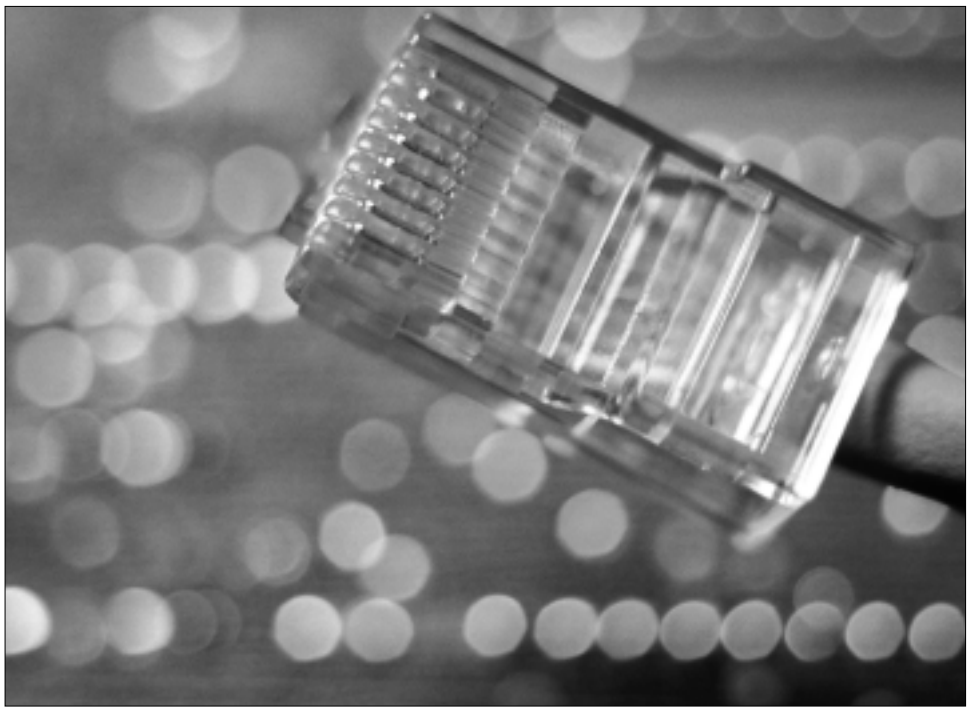


Technology: Will Everyone be in Control?

BY CANDIS CALLISON

ABSTRACT

With the Internet here to stay, the reality now faced is a familiar one for technologies, media and otherwise. That is, what ideals will it serve: the public good or the forces of private enterprise and the free market economy? The author poses this and other important questions and offers a cautionary note for Canadians.

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In a conference session prior to mine where much about youth preferences was discussed, there was a very funny quip about college-age kids having a "retro" 90s party. I kind of got stuck on this.

First, because I started to realize that I am in fact aging enough to look back nostalgically at an entire decade of adult life. And secondly, because the legacy of the booming late 90s has special relevance for this topic. In my estimation, a 90s party would not be complete without some heady recitation of cyber-rhetoric written by the likes of John Perry Barlow, and many others who wrote for *Wired* Magazine and other high tech publications during the early and mid 90s[1]. To illustrate what I mean by cyber-rhetoric, I'll give you a quick sample recently excerpted in *The Economist* magazine from Barlow's 1996 "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace." It begins like this:

> "Governments of the industrial world, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from cyberspace, the new home of mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather… We will create a civilization of the mind in cyberspace[2]."

It is kind of difficult to keep a straight face reading this. But despite the misguided euphoria now all too apparent in this quote, it is an artifact of this particular era of technological adaptation and development. And as such, it calls for some deeper analysis.

Specifically, the strength of this rebuke to the industrialized world, and I would argue by extension to key societal institutions like those involving media, stems in part from a couple of underlying issues that pertain directly to the questions posed to my panel.

First, there was and still is a belief that a kind of hegemonic stranglehold exists governing who has the ability to shape the perception and agendas of the public. In this vein then, broadcast media represents the few elite voices that can speak to the many, and the many are in turn hard pressed to find ways to respond, to interact, to connect with others of like mind. So it was that the idea of direct personalized access and the ability to form community outside entrenched boundaries and structures became enshrined in some of the guiding metaphors of the Internet revolution, metaphors like independence, freedom, new space, and succession from the tyranny of broadcast media.

Second, cyber-rhetoric is somewhat emblematic of the technological determinism that pervades much of the past centuries' ideals of progress and accomplishment. It is not entirely dissimilar from the hype of the railroad, the telegraph, the telephone, and so on. But in contrast and response to this hollow hype, technology is now being characterized by leading science and technology scholars as a 'web of human practices,' involving materiality, knowledge and process[3]. In other words, instead of technology leading the way and determining our future and our past, technology is about us – our ideals, values, beliefs, hopes, dreams and the ability to make technology serve these.

Has information technology changed the rules? I tend to think it has merely expanded the spectrum of possibilities and experiences

The 90s rhetoric of the Internet revolution may be dated, but the fact of the Internet's reach and existence is not, nor is its possibility to transform the way we interact, do business, and think about the world. Has information technology changed the rules? I tend to think it has merely expanded the spectrum of possibilities and experiences.

A networked society means that there are new channels of access in addition to the old[4]. It has in effect acknowledged, formalized, and created other lines of access, control, and flight in rhizomatic predictable and unpredictable patterns. Cohesion occurs and dissipates on networks. Alliances and plural identities are forged through interconnectivity defying notions of institutionalized relations. Indeed, what matters most is that standard protocols for connection to the network are observed. In effect, it is less about content and more about form. There are inherent structuring conventions like coding and algorithms that may limit, inhibit or overstructure creative impulses in a networked realm. But on the whole, these are significantly different rules for engagement than those enjoyed by other forms of media or societal organizations and institutions.

I could go on here, but let me return to the idea of the network society as technology shaped by us. Take the concept posited by Theorist Michel de Certeau of "making do" – the idea that individuals are constantly developing strategies and tactics to deal with the constraining order of everyday life[5]. In the context of media, where MIT's Henry Jenkins has adapted de Certeau's theory, this means that individuals take what is given to them by broadcast media and create their own variations and understandings[6]. The Internet, in this case, merely provides an outlet, a platform with which to introduce these variations. And it begs the questions: did technology liberate us? Or did it formalize and publicize the existing libratory impulses and practices?

In this sense then, the fragmentary nature of an individual's reception of information has always existed. The Internet has merely given us the conduit in which to gather more fragments and connect them in new and interesting ways.

With the bubble over, and the Internet here to stay, the reality now faced is a familiar one for technologies, media and otherwise. That is, what ideals will it serve: the public good or the forces of private enterprise and the free market economy? Are they necessarily polarized? And who, in this case, can best determine the public good or who the 'public' is? Is it the users of Napster, and its evolved heir apparent: Kazaa? Copyright lawyers? Is it the Bush Administration and the US Military? Microsoft or the open source movement?

What's different about information technology is that there are no owners to regulate, no concentration to be wary of, and at the same time, it has become more and more pervasive in our modern lifestyles. For example, cash machines and email use the same conduit to make our lives more convenient and connected. Yet, the programming code, software, encryption, data use and storage that underlie these conveniences are a kind of opaque technological "black box" which few dare to enter and understand, let alone suggest solutions to the increasingly problematic and abstract issue of privacy. How many politicians and lawmakers do you know who understand the ins and outs of the Internet as well as they do radio and television?

To see the downside of a networked society and the potential for regulation and control – both positive and negative, one only has to review the Bush government's

still standing proposal of a Total Information Awareness program, which proposes to collect all available data including financial, personal, and health to create profiles for tracking individuals. Even the US Congress had a problem with this level of surveillance and privacy erosion, but it remains to be seen whether a truly effective deterrent will stand in the way of its implementation. After all, it can be done. It is possible. But then, there are a few issues facing this same test right now, and I would imagine the Internet is probably the least of anyone's worries.

However, maybe it should be moved up the priority list here in Canada. Because the reality is that the majority of information technology is being developed and disseminated in the United States. And I would posit that the US government and US corporations are making decisions that in effect are world Internet policy governing the use, practices, and possibilities of information technology. A networked society does not have borders, but borders still do exist and influence technological and business practices. What influence does Canada have in these realms? How do we protect the interests of Canadians? Or are we all still staring googly-eyed at the graphic user interface remaining blissfully happy about the quality of our search results – so much so that we neglect to invest in gaining knowledge about the nature of the code and infrastructure that supports it? If we are to take the concept of networked society seriously, then we might consider a creative and appropriate intervention to mitigate the effects and influences of US decisions on our businesses, infrastructures, and access to individual data.

Unfortunately for us all, Barlow whom I earlier quoted has had to rethink his ideas about cyberspace. *The Economist* article I referenced at the beginning of this talk included a more recent Barlow quote from 2003. In it, Barlow states that the ongoing fight to "control everything we know" will "determine the future of humanity". Not sure I agree with the dramatic prediction, but the sentiment is depressingly more relevant than the 'Declaration of Independence' he made six years ago.

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[1] Fred Turner, a visiting MIT scholar from University of California San Diego first introduced this term, "cyber-rhetoric" to a group of graduate students I was part of in the Program in Comparative Media Studies at MIT.

[2] David Manasian, "A survey of the internet society: Digital dilemmas," *The Economist*, 25 Jan. 2003, p. 3.

[3] Bruno Latour, *We Were Never Modern,* trans. Catherine Porter, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Wiebe E. Bijker, Thomas P. Hughes, and Trevor Pinch, eds., *The Social Construction of Technological Systems: New directions in the sociology and history of technology,* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).

[4] The term, "network society" as I am using it comes from Manuel Castells' *The Rise of the Network Society,* 2nd Ed., (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000). I am also utilizing related theories put forth in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* trans. Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); Bruno Latour, *We Were Never Modern*; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

[5] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* trans. Steve Rendall (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 29-31.

[6] Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).

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