Electronic Empire

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As we continue into the terra nova of the electronic frontier, there is no set destiny that determines how the electronic society evolves. For all of the promise of true democracy, free markets, unrestrained speech, and the creation of a global village, there remains the distinct possibility that the tools empowering this utopia will just as likely be used to enslave, repress, and balkanize the planet. In addition, if history is any teacher, the latter is a much more likely scenario. Two forces array themselves against the realization of a global village: First, human nature requires borders to distinguish the we from the them; second, nations will continue to serve the purpose of power elites, and these power interests will preserve sovereignty and distort the information infrastructure to serve this end.

The Social Curse

Regardless of our technological prowess, we remain the same crude species that lurched out of the cave a few thousand years ago. Although we have achieved remarkable feats of civilization, we remain essentially bound by our evolution and instinct. It is critical to understand that humankind has evolved as social creatures, with as powerful a social instinct as bees, wolves, or ants. This social imperative drives a significant portion of our lives as we struggle to mate and prosper in the complex social hierarchies we inhabit. We define ourselves by the groups we belong to, and just as importantly, we define ourselves in juxtaposition to the others.

With the Internet, we are inundated with others, with information about ideas and customs well beyond our parochial experience. Many believe this expanding familiarity with the humanity's rich diversity will yield a pan-human empathy that will render nations, borders, and traditional antipathies into obsolete artifacts of a less-informed age.

Unfortunately, there is little in human history that supports this expectation; nations represent the largest salient aggregation with which humans identify, and because they need to identify as a member of us, and in contrast to them, there must always be nations and national culture. The Internet, particularly when combined with other mass media, begins to blur cultural and national distinctions as it overloads us with information. In many respects, it creates a pressure to assimilate into a larger, heterogeneous global culture. However, as a species, we are not comfortable with too high a level of heterogeneity, and so we rebel by reestablishing our identity as a member of the largest group with which we are comfortable. It is important to note that some of the most powerful nationalist movements begin as rebellions against assimilation: fascists and national socialists fighting the assimilation of European communism, the communist Chinese and fundamentalist Moslems fighting the cultural assimilation of the West; and more recently, the rise of a variety of nationalist parties in Europe fighting the assimilation of the European union. Thus, it is almost inevitable that as globalization continues to blur national distinctiveness, the nationalist impulse will assert itself and people will seek to reassert the sovereignty of their nation and preserve its integrity.

The Internet and the Power Elite

In capitalist economies in general, and in information economies specifically, there is a pressing need for stable national governments, because ultimately, the government is the guarantor of the basis of wealth (for instance, through control of the banking system) and of the social and physical infrastructure of trade. Even the most profoundly multinational of firms has little interest in losing the predictability and stability of the countries in which they operate. Hence, while they may work to influence the regulatory environment in their favor, they will tolerate little that would broadly destabilize nations in which they have a significant interest.
The mega-mergers between access service providers and content providers will continue unabashed until the Internet has all of the rich diversity of ideas of broadcast television.

Thus, because of its economic and strategic importance, the control of the Internet will be absolute. We are already seeing well-intentioned legislators in a number of countries working to restrict what can and cannot be published on the Internet. Whether it's hate speech banned in Australia, political communication in China, indecency in the U.S., or tobacco advertising just about anywhere, it is all part of a pattern of reducing the freedom of the medium. Contrary to the popular myth, the content of the Internet can be controlled. People live in real space, and in real space, the laws of sovereign nations continue to apply. Thus, while you can access any information you wish, you can also be locked up for doing so if you violate local laws prohibiting your access. Thus, freedom on the Internet is already illusory; as governments develop more sophisticated monitoring tools, they will continue to effectively restrict the demand side of Internet content.

One of the great myths of our era is the Internet is everyman's medium; we see it popularly as a happy anarchy of participants and a free market of ideas. What we forget is we do not own the Internet and only use it according to the rules of those who do. At its most basic level, the Internet relies on an infrastructure of wires owned by a handful of corporate entities, and ultimately, whoever owns the wires really controls the Internet.

This is certainly not a popular view; most people believe the Internet represents the greatest open market of ideas and communication in human history. While true at this particular moment in its evolution, it is an unlikely description of the Internet's future. Like all frontiers, once civilization discovered the Internet, it began to fence it in and create law and order. We are already seeing smaller ISPs being squeezed out of the market by bigger players with a better deal on high-speed data lines; the mom-and-pop ISP is soon a thing of the past.

Business will also control the supply side of the Internet; the mega-mergers between access service providers and content providers will continue unabashed until the Internet has all of the rich diversity of ideas of broadcast television.

The combination of superiorly crafted content and economies of scale in delivery will soon obviate the small, dissident voices that characterize the contemporary Internet. However, unlike radio, cinema, and television, which have narcotized generations into obedience to the status quo, the Internet has the capability of returning information about the user to the content provider. This enables a bold new era of manipulation of content to create consumer demand: the bidirectional flow of the Internet will empower a level of consumer
manipulation of unimagined proportions.

Once the corporate community realized the importance of the Internet to productive activity, it became inevitable that the Internet would become a closely held, regulated and controlled, commercial commodity. Business organizations may regularly rail against the regulators, but they actually thrive on the predictability of regulation and rely on their ability to appeal to regulators to control the excesses of their competitors. Organizations look to strong national government to provide a consistency in regulatory control that can't be duplicated by trade organizations or extra-national entities.

No Second Troy
Therefore, contrary to the utopian wisdom of most observers of the evolving information economy, we do not see a global village in the near future. Both businesses and people need nations, to both protect and project their interests in a world too diverse to apprehend. While global trade will continue to expand, it will do so between nations and between populations that clearly identify with their own nation state. As for the Internet, the increasing control of content to manipulate both consumption and ideology will soon transform the most promising communicative medium in human history into yet another mechanism of coercion and control.

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A Larger Role in the Public Policy Process for User Control

Ari Schwartz

Predictions of the future always remind me of a documentary film I saw in a third-grade science class. The substitute teacher introduced it as The Year 2000 or something of the sort. It was filled with expert predictions of the technologies we could expect to enjoy at the turn of the next millennium. The idea was to inspire our imaginations so we could participate in making the future happen.

Some of the forecasts were probably accurate, though I don't remember any of them. I can, however, recall three that, to date, are off the mark:

Affordable domestic robots. The day of the robot servant would soon arrive. Meanwhile, third-graders around the world still have to make their beds and do their homework.

Disposable paper clothing. Obviously before the mainstream environmental movement, but even then seemed wasteful and impractical.

Flying cars. I think the narrator said this might not happen until later in the 21st century, so our friends, the mechanical engineers, still have some time to work out the details.

Perhaps the film did get its message across on some subconscious level. After all, I do work at the Center for Democracy and Technology. I do dream about the role of communication technology in future societies. However, there was a more immediate lesson: Predicting technologies that may appear in my own lifetime is a futile effort.

Similarly, trying to predict the