Government and the media have seized control of the Internet. It's up to us to reclaim it.

**BY ANTHONY TOWNSEND**

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**I AM A CYNIC.** When confronted with any new paean to the Internet and its abundant promise to eradicate prejudice, enrich our lives and break down national borders as we all snuggle up in the electronic village, I am, well, skeptical.

The Internet is not our friend. Granted, it has created enormous economic growth and facilitated a revolution in information. It has also made many of our lives easier and extended our communities beyond the boundaries of geography. The Internet really could have been our e-ticket to e-topia—a brave new world of meaningful connection and pure democracy.

Unfortunately, but predictably, once the real power of the Internet became apparent, the usual suspects—government and the media—quickly stepped in to control, manipulate and exploit the medium in the same way that they had already done with radio, motion pictures and TV. Now it's up to business leaders to keep things from getting worse.

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**Land of Opportunity**

Like the American Old West, the Internet was once frontier territory, a place where civilization had not yet encroached the spirit of creativity. There was great potential, but just like in the Old West, that promise soon began to attract conventional elements. And so the new settlers arrived and demanded their law and order; the Internet would have to be tamed, controlled and civilized.

As a form of infrastructure critical to commerce, the Internet represents a strategic interest that governments will always want to control. Although the Communications Decency Act got a lot of press, governments' real regulation of the Internet takes place in courtrooms worldwide. One of the best examples is the German government's assertion that eBay was prohibited from allowing sales of Nazi memorabilia, causing eBay to regulate all sales of items that could be connected with hate.

Yet it is the media industry that will finally strangle the
promise of the Internet. For more than a century, a small group of very powerful corporate and governmental concerns have controlled all of the major information media. The Internet represents a powerful challenge to that information hegemony, and the media needed to either take it over or relinquish its own enormous social and political impact.

With the ascendancy of the likes of AOL Time Warner, MSNI and a host of other content and service providers, the end of the Internet's frontier days is a fait accompli. It is really only a matter of time before the Internet becomes a mundane extension of cable TV and we are all treated to a variety of special events during "sweeps" week. Just as network TV and USA Today replaced the local newspaper as the source of most people's news and information, the Internet's media giants will marginalize the Matt Drudges with slicker production values and attractive content options. In the end, they will control what most people find on the Internet.

The problem is, most people will never really comprehend just how insidiously the medium has been usurped. The deliberate retention of the cutesy personal pages and the mom-and-pop commerce sites lulls the average Jane or Joe into believing that this is still everyone's medium. And frankly, as long as mom and pop do not cut in to the economic turf of one of the major players, they are generally safe. Meanwhile, most of us are safe to set up our little chats and publish our politics, because they will go largely unnoticed as search engines become more beholden to the media giants.

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**Why It Matters**

Since most of these processes are as inevitable as the tides fear that there is little utility in doing anything more than recognizing what is happening and trying to get the average person to understand that the first few layers of their Internet experience are orchestrated by the same folks who brought them Us magazine or Joanie Loves Chachi.

The real danger, though, is not just in the loss of what the Internet could have been, it is in what the Internet will become. People went to the movies, they watched TV—people live on the Internet. No one ever filed their taxes through Warner Brothers or sought medical advice from Time magazine, but they now do both on AOL. And Warner Brothers never really knew who came to its movies, but AOL certainly knows who is using its services. Traditional media influenced our collective thinking, but we lived our lives away from the media; now the media provides the infrastructure—its infrastructure—for our lives.

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This should give pause not just to anyone concerned about individual choice and freedom, but also to anyone concerned about business and the economy. When the media and the infrastructure of trade are vested in the same hands, we are coming perilously close to a centralized economy. As information exchange is attenuated in deference to alliances among a handful of corporate and media entities, it will be harder than ever for new organizations to compete.

Business leadership is the key to keeping the Internet open. The real challenge is to create a critical mass of sophisticated individual and corporate users who demand an open system. Business organizations that provide Internet access for their employees can teach them about their informational options, which makes more productive employees as well as better Internet citizens. Businesses should also be militantly open-systems-oriented and refuse to work with companies that inhibit information flow in any way. Taken together, the actions of a concerned business community may actually be able to prevent the degradation of the Internet’s profound opportunity.

Do you think the Internet is in good hands? Let us know at difference@cio.com.

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