

The Political Demographics of Cyberspace

By Michel Bauwens

We have all known that innovation always comes from the fringes, before it is co-opted and integrated by commercial interests.

Undoubtedly, the commercialization of the Internet will also have an influence on the Internet culture. First, traditional businesses will increasingly want a presence on the Internet, in the form of electronic storefronts. Second, there's a new breed of cyber-entrepreneurs exploiting new niches. We do not belong to the group of people who deplores this development. We believe business is a legitimate activity, and that it will not destroy the net. The barter economy and the new cyber-entrepreneurs will find a modus vivendi. The free services and knowledge sharing will survive, supplemented with fee-based services and electronic commerce. There are powerful technological and social reasons why these forces will not dominate the net: the nature of the medium simply does not allow for centralized control and for intrusive broadcasting. Only Invited Persuaders' will be culturally acceptable. As has been proven many times by now, the users of the Internet have enough retaliatory power at their kill unsavory practices in the bud.

The above section is based on personal observations and analysis. What do actual studies tell us?

1) That the net is characterized by elite demographics. The typical user is a white male in his thirties, single, with a high educational attainment and above average income. For the future we see an increase of the younger segment and older professionals as well, since corporations are increasingly connecting themselves. We believe that the sexual ratio will not remain as biased as it is today. Evidence from computer classes in primary schools suggest that introducing the Internet acts as a powerful magnet for female students. According to some observers, it is the communicative aspect of the Internet which attracts an increasing number of women. While we believe there will always be educational requirements, lower prices should mean a gradual democratization of Internet usage.

2) That there is a strong libertarian' bent on the net. Surveys show that in the U.S., there are more Republicans than Democrats online, but that while the Internet population may be economically conservative (which mainly means they are against government intervention), they are not morally conservative (in the sense of being for law and order', against abortion, for the death penalty, etc...). Anti-government, anti-hierarchy, anti-big business, and anti-censorship are the often voiced sentiments of what seems the majority of the Internet user company. At least they are the sentiments expressed by the vocal part!

Do these social forces find a political expression? They indeed do.

I had the opportunity to witness the first conference of the American Progress & Freedom Foundation, led by Newt Gingrich, an organization which seems to represent the economic forces creating the technology. The ideological rationales behind the APFF are the Third Wave ideas of Alvin Toffler.

Speakers argued that just as the industrial revolution (second wave) had to sweep away the restrictions imposed by feudal society (first wave), the third wave forces now should do the same with second wave restrictions. Hence Big Government, and industrial society' type institutions like the educational establishment, welfare, and unions should be made harmless, and greater freedom of enterprise (no

restrictions on cable/telecom mergers) should allow the emergence of a new cyber economy. What was puzzling to me, especially as a European observer, is that not all speakers were Republican. The Board included people not usually associated with the political ideas of a Newt Gingrich. I'm thinking of E and even of Alvin Toffler, who, though known as a personal friend of the Gingrich's, is not a right winger or free-marketeer.

Such a bipartisan gathering would suggest a temporary bipartisan alliance between left and right Third Wave forces, that just as the French Revolution originally united bourgeois moderate Girondins and radically populist Jacobins, similarly cyberspace forces would unite to overthrow Second Wave political forces, and would split up after achieving victory. It is too early to say whether the APFF will have discredited itself before such a process could consolidate. As it turns out, debate on the Internet was quite critical of the AFPP. It was noted that the foundation's primary discussion paper, the 'Magna Carta of the Knowledge Age', written by George Gilder and Alvin Toffler, among others, seemed to consider cyberspace as a collection of knowledge bases, and not as a collection of people communicating. Reports that the APFF may have been a conduit for donations to the Gingrich political machine may have further weakened the foundation's potential role. However, it must be noted that most par the APFF meeting, with few exceptions (such as Gilder and Dyson), were not indigenous to cyberspace and the Internet, but rather seemed a group of people who intended to piggy-back on the enthusiasm generated by the Internet.

Another expression of cyber-culture comes from the pioneering users. I am primarily thinking of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a genuine bottom-up political initiative. The idea behind the EFF is that the traditional democratic freedoms should be duplicated and extended in cyberspace. It is the main political force fighting for due process, against censorship, and for the protection of privacy. It tackles head on the new problems generated by the electronic networks. Its leaders come from the sixties generation: John Perry Barlow was a songwriter for the Grateful Dead, and Mitch Kapor not only the founder of Lotus but also a Transcendental Meditation instructor (he still is a practicing Buddhist). Rumor has it that both Gore's staff and the EFF have several Deadheads' on the payroll. In any case, the EFF confirm the strong links between the traditional counterculture, both in its political and mystical/psychedelic expressions, and current cyberspace. They remind us that the personal co above all a political project, to empower individual users against the centralizing effect of IBM mainframes, and that the Internet is seen as a continuation of this empowerment strategy. The EFF is a genuinely popular force in the Internet community, and has succeeded in temporarily defeating the Clipper Chip plans of the Clinton administration. They are able to quickly mobilize hundreds of thousands of electronic signatures to defeat moves in Congress. Thus, the EFF is a left/liberal mirror image of the APFF-type coalition, as it also has powerful corporate sponsors. Though the majority of EFF supporters may perhaps vote Republican (Barlow himself has been an active Republican), on issues of censorship and privacy they are definitely on the side of freedom of expression.

Another expression of the Internet community is the freenet movement. Freenets are locally-based (but internet-connected) networks that aim to enhance the social life of cities through the creation of online communities. The idea behind freenets is to build digital cities, where local associations, governments, and companies, can offer information, and where the local community can discuss and communicate. It is a grassroots effort to democratize the access to electronic information, just as the public library movement aimed at democratizing access to books. Several hundred projects have been successfully initiated. Digital Amsterdam is an European example.

Much smaller, at this stage mainly an intellectual exercise in academic circles, is the cyberfeminist movement. Traditional feminism states that, despite the claims of gender being less important in

cyberspace, the Internet is still a sexist environment. Cyberfeminism provides a more optimistic reading and is fairly typical of the enthusiasms generated by the Internet. According to cyberfeminists like Sadie Plant, the Internet is a quintessentially female technology. First, the values of the Internet, like the free exchange of information, the lessening of hierarchy, and the nurturing aspects of virtual communities, are female values. Second, networking technology is a final proof that the technology is out of control' and that the traditional male quest of control' can no longer operate. Hence, she claims that the Internet represents nothing less than the death of patriarchy. A related strain of thought is represented by Donna Haraway, who in her *Cyborg Manifesto* argues that women should technology.

Rather than wanting to becoming goddesses (as New Age feminism has suggested) they should aim at becoming cyborgs, half machine, half human. In any case, it does indeed seem that the Internet will be a powerful factor in reconciling women and technology.

Equally small, but very significant is the Extropian movement. While it has only a few hundred members, it connects luminaries like Hans Moravec, the robot historian, and Erik Drexler, the nanotechnologist, and it has an extraordinary cultural influence on magazines like *Wired* and *Mondo*.

They are partly responsible for the justification of the reigning optimism on the Internet. Extropians are against the limits imposed by nature and are convinced that technology is the means by which humans can free themselves from natural constraints. Hence, they foster research in cryogenics (Marvin Minsky, the AI pioneer says: if you die it's because you deserve it'), life extension, and believe we are entering the age of the space-bound post-human. Extropians are convinced, and here we totally agree with them, that the Internet is a laboratory for the social practices of the future. What's important here is to realize that the Internet is freeing humans from the constraints of geography, and that we should have political practices reflecting this fact. Radical groups like the Extropians force all the rest of us to squarely face the metaphysical underpinnings of our technological quest, and its occult meaning which is nothing else than that humanity endeavors to acquire god-like powers. As Steward Brand (creator of the legendary *Whole Earth Catalog*) once said, we are as gods, so we might as well be good at it.'

What is the message of netizens (i.e., the users of cyberspace/citizens of the Internet) toward these forces? Toward the establishment we should say, thanks, but no thanks,' meaning that while we support a better infrastructure, it should not only go to business networks and interactive TV experiments, but also to support the existing Internet network. It is the only medium with a radical democratic and innovative business potential. In fact, the Internet is an incredibly powerful business tool that will guarantee the transition to the of the information society.

To the information highway critics of the democratic left, I believe we should say: don't try to stop a technological juggernaut. If you're not part of the steamroller, you're part of the road. Realize how the Internet and the new networks can actually create a type of society where democratic ideals can actually be implemented. Let's make sure that the poor and the disadvantaged can make use of the new opportunities. Let's defend the hard-won democratic rights in the new electronic environments, support the establishment of freenets and digital cities, and the providing of Internet access for all. Above all, use the networks to your own advantage, to spread ideas worth hearing, and stimulate the needed debate. So far, the response of traditional political forces, at least in Europe, has been woefully inadequate.

We'll conclude with this call to netizens:

The Second Wave created the bourgeois citizen (aided and abetted by the labor movement) which became the motor of social change and political democratization. The Third Wave creates the netizen, the inhabitant of cyberspace, who engages in the sharing of knowledge. Just as the citizen was the motor of bourgeois democracy, netizens will be the vanguard force of electronic democratization.

Principles like open access, universal service, freedom of speech and the protection of privacy are characteristic of this agenda. So the responsibility of the first netizens is clear: it is our task first of all to educate our citizens, government and business people to the advantages and importance of the Internet. Second, to help them in their efforts to join these networks. Third, to make the political world conversant with the new issues involved in the emergence of cyberspace. Most importantly, the realization has to sink in that the old laws do not necessarily apply, and that new creative solutions are sought.