Freedom, Community and the Third Wave

By Paul Shafer

This is the dawning of a New Civilization. By now the claim that we are entering a new age of some kind or another is routine. Alvin Toffler's Third Wave argument, for example, claims we are experiencing a technological revolution of dramatic proportion that is changing the way we think, communicate, and act. New technologies have created previously unimaginable possibilities for the exercise of individual enterprise and for participation in the evolution of a new society. In short, the so-called Third Wave offers civilization a new conception of freedom, both in terms of individuals and communities, a freedom unencumbered by the mass mentality of the old forms of civil society and state.

Fact or fiction? In part the answer to this question depends on your point of view. According to a recent document distributed by the Progress & Freedom Foundation entitled A Magna Carta for a New Civilization, the Third Wave is a promising and inevitable reality that ought to be ushered in with all due speed. Viewed through the telescopic lens of privilege and optimism, the future holds all the excitement of the latest high-end automobile: it's speedy, stylish, and its sheer novelty is exhilarating. Who wouldn't want to drive a BMW or Mercedes? Of course in reality most people settle for something far less, even the bus or subway, and would have a difficult time imagining a future so rich in technological possibility.

It should not be surprising, then, that there are other perspectives on technology. The National Community Building Network and The Center for Human Resources at Brandeis University have collaborated on a more practically oriented document entitled Community Builders Guide to Telecommunications Technology. Their insights are derived from the real needs of people and their communities. In what follows I will review the major points of both positions, concluding with an evaluative analysis of the Third Wave argument.

The Magna Carta for a New Civilization is based on the thoughts of its four co-authors: Ms. Esther Dyson, Mr. George Gilder, Dr. George Keyworth, and Dr. Alvin Toffler. Its primary function is to provide theoretical description of the new epoch humankind has entered--the Third Wave--and to suggest a political, economic, and cultural agenda the authors believe is necessary in order to make a complete transition from Second to Third Wave.

The Magna Carta begins with a provocative, if controversial, thesis:

> "The central event of the 20th century is the overthrow of matter. In technology, economics, and the politics of nations, wealth--in the form of physical resources--has been losing value and significance. The powers of mind are everywhere ascendant over the brute force of things."

Given this thesis, the bulk of the document is devoted to a descriptive analysis of the major components of the social sphere by focusing on important distinctions between Second and Third Wave elements in each area. The authors explain the nature of typically Third Wave concepts like cyberspace, though most of their analysis focuses on more traditional Second Wave components of Western society like property, the marketplace, freedom, community, and government. In conclusion, they sketch out a set of recommendations for the remaking of government in order to pave the way for

a Third Wave civilization. The political question of our age, an age still in transition, asks who will shape the nature of cyberspace and with it the character and institutions of a new age.

The central metaphor for the changes in society that have given rise to speculation about an epochal shift to a new age is cyberspace. Cyberspace is a bioelectronic environment of knowledge that exists everywhere there are telephone wires, coaxial cables, fiber-optic lines or electromagnetic waves. In this sense, it is both universal, stretching across the globe in every direction, and formless. Like a frontier, cyberspace is continually expanding as people create and define its limits at an increasingly accelerated pace. According to the authors of the Magna Carta, the exploration of cyberspace is the key to a future filled with individual opportunity and freedom:

> "Cyberspace is the land of knowledge, and the exploration of that land can be a civilizations's truest, highest calling. The opportunity is now before us to empower very person to pursue that calling his or her own way."

The bioelectronic frontier poses some critical challenges to a society still largely enamored with the old ways. In fact, as the Magna Carta argues, the social institutions of the Second Wave must all be radically transformed before the Third Wave can fully take root. Primarily, this means that the mass mentality of centralization and standardization with which our institutions and culture have been built, must be "demassified." Consequently we must rethink some of the most basic concepts of our culture, including property, the marketplace, freedom, community, and government.

There are several forms of property that make up cyberspace: "Wires, coaxial cable, computers and other 'hardware'; the electromagnetic spectrum; and 'intellectual property' -- the knowledge that dwells in and defines cyberspace." The Magna Carta argues that intellectual "cyberproperty" is the key Third Wave property form. The most fundamental social transformation in the new civilization will be the shift from a mass-production, mass-media, mass-culture civilization to a demassified civilization, which means that knowledge must itself be demassified:

> "The dominant form of new knowledge in the Third Wave is perishable, transient, customized knowledge: The right information, combined with the right software and presentation, at precisely the right time."

Thus, the big question as we stand at the threshold of the new civilization concerns the ownership of cyberspace property rights. Who will define the nature of these rights and how?

Actionable knowledge--a concept encompassing "data, information, images, symbols, culture, ideology, and values"--is also the key to understanding the Third Wave economy. "Customized knowledge permits 'just in time' production for an ever rising number of goods." This transforms the market, creating the potential for a dynamic competition to replace the static competition typical of the mass production mentality of the Second Wave. The downsizing and restructuring trend of recent years is an example of business using Third Wave technology to make themselves more dynamic.

Third Wave innovations demand not just a re-thinking of property and markets, but of the American concept of freedom itself. The authors of the Magna Carta understand freedom in terms of individual liberty, and argue that a reaffirmation of the basic principles of such freedom is necessary for a genuine exploration of the latest American frontier--cyberspace. In practice this means rejecting the mass institutions of the industrial age--"corporate and government bureaucracies, huge civilian and military administrations, schools of all types"--to make room for the flourishing of individual liberty and the

pioneer spirit. No longer will individuals be required to give up their freedom in order for the system as a whole to work:

> "The complexity of Third Wave society is too great for any centrally planned bureaucracy to manage. Demassification, customization, individuality, freedom--these are the keys to success for Third Wave civilization."

Given all the talk about individual liberty and the accompanying plurality of interests in the Third Wave society, what will be the nature of community? The Magna Carta argues that the freedom and diversity already emerging as mass society breaks up should not be understood in terms of the fragmentation and balkanization of society, but as an opportunity for new forms of community. Though no one knows what they will look like, "cyberspace will play an important role knitting together the diverse communities of tomorrow, facilitating the creation of 'electronic neighborhoods' bound together not by geography but by shared interests."

Finally, the Magna Carta argues that government must be reinvented for the 21st Century. Third Wave government will be vastly smaller than the current one (by 50 percent or more), though it will not necessarily be weaker. In fact, the transition from Second to Third Wave "will require a level of government activity not seen since the New Deal." The authors outline five proposals defining the role of government during this transitional period:

1. Creating and facilitating the conditions for universal access to interactive multimedia. 2. Promoting dynamic competition through antitrust regulation. 3. Defining and assigning property rights in cyberspace. 4. Creating pro-Third Wave tax and accounting rules. 5. Remaking government through the model of decentralization.

In order to grasp the future, the authors of the Magna Carta argue that we must understand that the most basic political question does not concern control over the last days of industrial society, but who will shape the new civilization rising to replace it:

> "It is time to embrace these challenges, to grasp the future and pull ourselves forward. If we do so, we will indeed renew the American Dream and enhance the promise of American life."

A Different Perspective

The Community Builders Guide to Telecommunications Technology proffers a much different perspective on technology. For serious community builders, the central metaphor for the Third Wave -- or any other age, for that matter--is not cyberspace, but community. Where Toffler and company are content to wait and see what the communities of the future will look like ("No one knows what the Third Wave communities of the future will look like...") the authors of the Community Builders Guide realize the necessity of acting today to build the communities of tomorrow. It is not technology that shapes the process of community development, but people. At the same time, however, they understand the relevance of the new technologies for community building and have developed a strategic vision for the incorporation of technology into organizational planning.

It is essential that community builders take an active role in their approach to technology; they must "ask serious questions about what issues they want to address using technology, and how the

information super highway can help them achieve community goals and improve the lives of its citizens." Thus, community builders must "be deliberate and strategic as they venture out in the midst of this information revolution."

The function of the guide is threefold: (1) to introduce community builders to some of the opportunities and potentials of the new telecommunications technologies; (2) to raise awareness of relevant policy questions affecting the use of and access to technology by community organizations; and finally (3) to provide a process to aid community groups in assessing needs and resources that might be addressed through new technology.

The authors of the Guide argue that telecommunications can be utilized as an effective community-building tool in three different areas. The first of these involves information sharing that enhances community-building activities by linking together groups with common interests. Secondly, technology makes possible increased public access to information and civic processes. Finally, technology can improve service delivery to communities at easily accessible sites in areas like education, health and social services.

The overarching policy issue affecting communities concerns access and use. Barriers that affect access to technology such as cost, location, training and others must all be fought if communities are to effectively use new technologies. Community organizations must be especially aware of phenomena such as technology redlining and the market-driven development of infrastructure if they are to ensure fair access for people outside the loop of capital.

In conclusion, the authors of the Guide offer a collaborative community assessment process to help organizations find a starting point for their utilization of technology. "Since the technology serves the people, and since people make communities, our focus here is on how to get people together for the purpose of building together. With a spirit of collaboration the assessment process becomes more of an exploration of resources than an exploration of need; the process is a community treasure hunt. Once discovered and developed, the existing community resources will guide the plan for technological supports."

Which path points the way to real freedom--the Third Wave frontier or the technological community treasure hunt? Before answering this question one must acknowledge the necessity, in any comprehensive reckoning of society, for both theoretical and practical scrutiny of the issues at stake.

The Community Builders Guide recognizes the practical necessity of strong community-level organization for a healthy society. Individual participation in social institutions as diverse as family, neighborhood groups, trade unions, church organizations, and countless others establishes common ground and shared interest among the diverse elements of society. These institutional links, and not the myth of libertarian freedom, form the backbone of a free society to the extent that every society is necessarily determined by its social character, that is, by what unites and is held in common. (Libertarians must find their way back to Rousseau's state of nature.) Without this understanding of the real bonds tha together, any theoretical account of society is necessarily one-sided and abstract.

Perhaps the real question, then, concerns the relation of technology to the social fabric of our society. A genuine account of the now and future society, in other words, must consider the affect of new technology on the social institutions that make the values of a free society real. According to the Third Wave-inspired authors of the Magna Carta, the concepts definitive of our present society--property, the marketplace, freedom, community, and government--will all be revolutionized by technology and the

bioelectronic frontier. Yet technology, in itself, is nothing new; after all, primitive sticks and stones are a form of technology and affected human life in their own way just as significantly as cyberspace. Thus, it is not technology itself--whether fire, gunpowder, printing press, or microchip--that is the primary issue. What is really at stake are the ideas and values constitutive of civilized human life and the form they take in actual social and political institutions.

To fully understand the relation of Third Wave technology to both the ideas and institutions of society therefore requires more than crystal ball speculation about the future. Whatever the future holds, it must necessarily emerge from the actuality of the here and now. Before we leap toward an uncritical embrace of the bioelectronic frontier and the free enterprise it promises, we must interrogate the ideals constitutive of a free society and determine which social forms make those ideals a reality.

As the Community Builders Guide points out, there are many very real political issues to consider as we make decisions about the technological future. How, for example, can we guarantee fair use and access to Third Wave technology? How can we help the many disenfranchised victims reconnect themselves to society? What is to prevent the elite classes from consolidating their power? Cyberspace alone provides no answer to these questions. What is needed is critical analysis of capital, of accumulated power, of the real meaning of freedom and democracy. Even as we embrace cyberspace as the wave of the future, we must continue to address the old questions from the past.