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The Internet as Cyberspace

There are many competing stories about the nature and function of the Internet. What are some of the key assumptions about technology and society informing these oppositional views of the 'Net?

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What Do We Think Of The Web We Weave?

The questions 'what is the Internet' and 'what will it become in the future' are both likely to draw a variety of responses, from a variety of people. These responses will be based on certain perceptions, biases and assumptions, which drive the thinking of their advocates. Looking at the assumptions behind these beliefs can help us to understand why there are such different views, and why certain groups support a particular prediction about the future of the 'Information Superhighway' and why other groups disagree completely.

In the 80's and early 90's, the 'net was a very different place to what it is today. Most connections were directly onto another system, often with the intent of accessing a Bulletin Board Service or similar information source. Businesses and 'the general public' soon came online, along with a movement towards freedom of speech, freedom of information, and freedom of electronic action. It was believed that the purpose of the Internet was to allow people to have free and open access to information of all kinds. This attitude was typified in the early days of the Internet in a 1986 document, written by 'The Mentor'. In his 'A Conscience of a Hacker', The Mentor writes "this is our world now", "you may stop this individual, but you can't stop us all". In The Mentor's mind, the Internet empowered people with the means to expand their minds and to explore new information which was previously not available to them. This belief must have been based on the expectation that more and more information would be plugged in to this network and that people would retain the ability to connect into this matrix of information as they wished. Along with this insatiable appetite for information came a desire to be unfettered and un-judged, to be free from real-world restrictions and to "exist without skin color, without nationality, without religious bias" (Mentor, 1986).

John Perry Barlow again verbalized The Mentor's desire for freedom and independence from governments and other traditional forms of control in his 'A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace' in 1996. In this declaration, Barlow states "we have no elected government, nor are we likely to have one", "we are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth" and "we will spread ourselves across the Planet so that no one can arrest our thoughts". Barlow believed that the Internet would remove all forms of bigotry by presenting us as nothing but our minds. In the Barlovian world, the Internet is "the new home of the Mind" (Barlow, 1996). Barlow appears to be assuming in this new "home of the Mind", that everyone will have access to the information they want, and be equal in each other's eyes. He claims that this online society has already developed its own "unwritten codes that already provide [it with] more order than could be obtained by any of [their] impositions" and that "from ethics, enlightened self-interest and the commonweal, [their] governance will emerge". This world will govern itself, without rigid laws and constitutions to force it down a particular path.

But while Barlovians are claiming the 'net is free and should remain as such, others are saying that this model is changing, and that sooner or later, it will be subjected to laws and social restrictions, just like the real world. Charles C Mann is one of the people saying these things, and in 'Taming the Web', he claims that there are three common misconceptions about the Internet which are leading people to ignore the fact that it will indeed come under some sort of control in the future. He says that "the world may well be on the path to a more orderly electronic future – one in which the Internet can and will be controlled" (2001). Mann believes that up to now, purely

commercial interests have judged the direction and extent of the Internet, but that in the future, laws with international reach will ensure a controlled and monitored online environment for all, whether we want it or not. Mann's argument hinges on the concept that the Internet **will** be controlled by rules, if not laws, that there is no avoiding this outcome; "the important question is not whether the Net can be regulated and monitored, but how and by whom" he states. This speaks of an assumption that either governments can and will step in to regulate access to and use of the Internet, or that corporations will expand until they are able to exert power or control of some sort over the market.

This idea of businesses controlling cyberspace is directly opposed in The Cluetrain Manifesto. In Cluetrain, the authors propose that the Internet is really about "enabling conversations among human beings" (Levine, Locke, Searls & Weinberger, Thesis 6). In their manifesto, the authors claim that the individual will rule the future of the Internet, and that businesses will bend to their wills in an attempt to stay a part of a rapidly evolving market. This outcome requires corporations to wake up to the change in the attitude of those who are online and start moving towards more direct communication channels and processes. "Companies that assume online markets are the same markets that used to watch their ads on television are kidding themselves" (Levine et al. Thesis 17). This view places faith in the nature of human communications and their ability and willingness to shape the future of the Internet.

All opinions about both the current state and the future direction of the Internet, whether it be as a communications enabler, commercial marketplace or political playground, are based on beliefs and assumptions about both the society that shapes it, and the technology which supports it. By analyzing these assumptions and the views they result in, we have gained insight into the perspective of the main opinions about what the Internet is and where it is going. It is important to consider these assumptions to avoid being blind sighted by apparently well-supported suppositions about an emerging technology that is still in a serious state of flux.

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