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Net Ideologies:
From Cyber-liberalism to Cyber-realism

Versions in: [Spanish] and [Italian]

Abstract

This paper analyses the over-optimistic ideology propagated by Wired magazine and the various oppositions to it, regarding the role of Internet in shaping our future. By exposing why the cyber-libertarians ideals will not happen and a five-year market hype period is coming to an end, this essay concludes with a more realist perspective of what this revolution is about.

Ideologies, in the outer and inner space

Ideologues, visionaries, or *digerati*(1)… Never in the human history have so many people laid down their views on what the future will be like. And never were these views, prognostics, or ideologies changed, and proven to be wrong, at such fast pace. Until recently, the common interpretation of the term ideology was somehow related to a long lasting belief. Capitalism vs. Communism, Left vs. Right, Libertarians vs. Conservatives and so on… Most of these dichotomies have lasted for centuries and there is no sign and no need for them to completely converge in the future.

On 20 July 1969, Neil Alden Armstrong, as commander of the *Apollo 11* lunar mission, became the first person to set foot on the moon. Over the following decades both the United States and the former Soviet Union invested billions of dollars in space research having as ultimate goal the protection and promotion of their ideologies. It was - many thought - just a matter of time until the day when the human race would have a secondary address: sidereal space. And the question was whether it would be communist or capitalist.

The year 2001 seemed like a good date for the move. The date was too far away for anyone to contest (mainly in the late sixties, when the *Apollo* project was at its full power and with outstanding results) and the turn of the millennium had its natural symbolic meanings. On top of that, Stanley Kubrick's 1968 masterpiece - *2001: A Space Odyssey* - was in everyone's mind.

But where we are "moving" to - at the end this century - is a much less obvious "place": cyberspace(2). The fall of the Berlin Wall, on 9 November 1991, not only unified the former East and West Germany, but also symbolised the end of the cold war. Capitalism defeated communism and USSR's ideology slowly fainted. Except for a few scientists and researchers, no one really cared what human life in outer space could be like. It was no longer a political issue! But predictions about the future lifestyle in cyberspace have skyrocketed! Ideologies in the so-called electronic frontier did not concern nations at the same intensity as in the past, but this time, private companies and some individuals (the self acclaimed *digerati*) propagated our future. No wonder cyberspace was soon known by many as the "electronic marketplace"…

It is beyond one's mind how much has been said about the changes a few thousands of computers, connected by high speed wires, will provoke. MIT's Media Lab director, Nicholas Negroponte, predicts that one billion people will be "netcitizens" by the year 2000 (3), the Speaker of US House of Representatives, Newt Gingrich, believes that making Congressional data available on the Net will turn America into a better democracy and Americans into better citizens (4), Bill Gates dreams about an Internet based friction-free market, and as for his friend, Esther Dyson cyberspace will "suck power away from governments, mass media and big business" (5). The list could go on and we would easily be led to believe that a web browser and an e-mail account would solve most of humankind's problems. In this scenario, everything would fit in perfectly and harmoniously.

Even the traditional form of representative government would be proven unnecessary.

The English perspective

In 1995, a critical essay written by Richard Barbrook and Andrew Cameron (co-founders of the Hypermedia Research Centre in London), vexingly named "The Californian Ideology", pinpointed many contradictions in the widespread hype. The paper is developed around a profound analysis of the unusual merge of the 60's New Left movement and the New Right libertarian ideals, only made possible by the potential of the new information technologies. Barbrook and Cameron not only highlighted the not so positive aspects of West Coast's lifestyle, such as racism, poverty and environmental degradation, while enumerating the factors responsible for the creation of the "virtual class" in the Bay Area, but they also attacked the so promoted new "Jeffersonian democracy" by reminding us that the third US president personally owned 200 human beings as slaves, as he spread free market ideals.

It is not hard to predict the feedback. Published in a handful of websites and translated into a half dozen languages, "The Californian Ideology" was hostilely responded to by many of who envisioned an optimistic cyber-based future, including one of the cyber-libertarians main spokesperson: Wired Magazine's former editor-in-chief, Louis Rossetto.

The "Californian Ideology" was an important step towards a reality shock in what this "revolution" is all about. "Only by giving a name we were able to ridicule them. Now people say: 'Oh, those are Californian ideologues'…"(6), said Barbrook in a recent seminar at the Hypermedia Research Centre (HRC). Yes, in this case the Net really overcomes geographical distances: the Californian ideologues are all over and the few examples mentioned above are as dispersed as in Massachusetts (Negroponte), Georgia (Gingrich), Washington State(Gates) and New York (Dyson). Anyone slightly net-aware these days knows about the hype, some are still firm believers, but a critical mass is already mocking at it. For many the Wired era is coming to an end.

Another response to "The Californian Ideology" came from former Wall Street analyst and current president of the New York New Media Association, Mark Stahlman, in an even more provocative title: "*The English Ideology and Wired Magazine*". Although also promoting a more sceptical view of the future, in a partial convergence with Barbrook and Cameron's work, Stahlman invested an enormous effort in linking the Californian ideology to all kinds of English philosophers and writers: from Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and Francis Bacon (1561-1626) to H.G. Wells, who was born in 1866 (the most recent he managed to find). His article insists that the San Francisco-based Wired magazine "represents yet another [English] attempt to invade American culture and to undermine American political and economic initiative"(7). Okay, one could buy it half century ago (actually when Wells was alive) but today Stahlman's analysis can only be seen as a distant and unrelated analogy. As Marx said, "history repeats itself, first as a tragedy, second as a farce"(8).

Although Stahlman managed to link the Greek-born Negroponte to the English culture (by revealing his secret dream: an AI-spawned robotic English butler) he overlooked Esther Dyson's background (who – like Mark Stahlman – also lives in New York, was a financial analyst and, currently, is one of the so-called *digerati*). Her father is Freeman Dyson, British-born internationally renowned physicist. At least it would be a living example.

"Cigar Aficionado"

But Dyson's case is peculiar: she belongs to a class of "cyberprophets" who are slowly getting down to Earth again. By following her weekly articles one can easily identify a change of tone, explicitly admitted in her 1997 book *Release 2.0*. "My first vision of cyberspace in *Release 1.0* [a IT newsletter for executives] was

optimistic and perhaps a bit naďve", Dyson says, "this new vision is better informed by experience, and wiser – but I have no illusions that there won't be need for *Release 2.1*, […] and ultimately a *Release 3.0* somewhere down the road" (9). Analogously, many of the critics have completely lost interest in the quest of proving how mislead the Wired troupe is. Anyone who listens to David Hudson's appeal "Let's Get Sober!" in his book-critique to net-optimism, "*Rewired*", knows that the hype is fading. And it is not only the professional writers and academic researches who say so. The amateur and one person-driven web site called "*What's Newt*", that during the last four years criticised Newt Gingrich's ideas and proposals has simply not been updated since last August. If you check out the site's homepage, the webmaster and software developer, Dan Schueler, simply says: "Sorry for the delays in updating *What's Newt*. I completely lost interest in Newt and whatever he might be saying or doing for the past several months."(10)

"Beyond the Californian Ideology". That was the theme of the seventh edition of *Cyber.Salon* - a monthly gathering of London-based digital artisans and intellectuals in a Bloomsbury cybercafe - promoted by the HRC and the Austrian online magazine Telepolis. One of the guest speakers on the 20th May 1998 meeting, Peter Lunenfeld (from the Art Center College of Design, Los Angeles, California), clearly stated: "The closer you get to San Francisco, the less serious you take Wired's ideas". And he continues: "Wired needed new celebrities to promote their view of the coming information era, so they created their own. It is like the *Cigar Aficionado* magazine, which covers displays healthy top models smoking cigars"(11).

Parallax

Wired was launched in January 1993, in a market inundated only by technical periodicals, such as Byte and PC World, with perhaps the exception of Mondo 2000. For most of techies used to the market *status quo* of computer related publications, Wired's glowing pages and predictions seem more attractive than porn magazines and it's appealing design gave the magazine nothing less than 18 awards from 1993 to 1997, including the three prizes conferred by the prestigious American Society of Magazine Editors (ASME).

But Mercedes-Benz and Tag Heuer adverts mixed with 8,000 word articles on how the "information superhighway" would bring power and knowledge to the poorest African country was something beyond comprehension! Looking back today, even 5-year-old articles are still so "updated", i.e. the predictions simply haven't happened, or are they still to happen? In the magazine's July 1993 issue, Mitchell Kapor, co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), wrote an extensive article named "Where is the Digital Highway Really Heading?", in which he states: "Life in cyberspace […] is more egalitarian than elitist, and more decentralised than hierarchical. It serves individuals and communities, not mass audiences". But the point, in this case, is: how do we get to live in this cyberspace/dreamland? Easy if you are a middle-class citizen of a First World nation, with your basic needs fulfilled, access to a phone line and a thousand-dollar computer. But how the "digital highway" will give food to Ethiopians before they can even think about having a phone is still to be discovered. Actually, with the help of Barbrook/Cameron, David Hudson, as well as the promoters of the recent "technorealism" movement, it is now easy to figure out the answer. It simply won't!

Not much more than 2% of the world population have online access. To reach the one billion Net users Nicolas Negroponte promotes, maybe we should think about the infrastructure first (and also make a deliberate effort to forget about "meaningless" issues, such as housing, literacy, and starvation). As David Kline exposed in his column "Market Forces" for HotWired, "currently there are only about 750 million to 800 million telephones lines worldwide. Even in Asia, where phone usage is growing the fastest, experts are predicting the installation of only 15 million to 20 million new lines annually over the next six years. But what the heck, let's just take a leap of faith and agree that maybe the world will have a billion phones in use by the year 2000. Does that give us a billion Net surfers? Even in the United States, with perhaps 160 million telephones, there are only 16

million to 20 million people on the Net. And the vast majority of these, as you no doubt are aware, come from affluent households (though significantly, less than half of all owners of computers *with* modems even choose to go online)" ([12](#)). It is not hard to understand why Kline's column was discontinued shortly after that, by Wired Ventures.

Anyone just a bit net-savvy these days knows the power of the search engines, such as Altavista, Lycos and Excite as well as how hard it is to get the right information on the first run. Usually thousands of URLs match our search criteria and the result is an end-of-millennium symptom: *information overload*. Yes, the Internet made it possible – for the top 2% of the population – to access information like never before in human history. But how are we going to deal with it, digest it, and interpret it? Above all, how are we going to survive the anxiety and other psychological consequences of this new era? The motto "information wants to be free" is on everybody's lips, but how much freedom will information actually bring us? Or it will just make us more confused and lost? As David Shenk puts it, we are heading towards a "data smog". When Newt Gingrich, announced "Thomas", a web site making publicly available all US Congressional documents, Shenk was right on the spot in identifying the political concealment within the act.

"If every citizen had access to the information that the Washington lobbyists have, we would have changed the balance of power in America towards the citizens and out of the Beltway", announced Gingrich in the National Public Radio on the morning of the 26th January 1995. But for Shenk, a veteran journalist who covered Washington D.C. politics in the early ages of a teleprinter link provided by the Federal News Service (that inundated his room at the speed of 2 pages a minute with all the key political transcripts), it was clear the consequences of that single deed. "Gingrich is smart enough to understand that opening the floodgates of information doesn't automatically turn Americans into better citizens", unmasks Shenk, "to the contrary, while some political specialists have benefited from the comprehensive disclosure, the average citizen has been more apt than before to get lost in the flood. It's *focus* that brings knowledge and power, not diffusion" ([13](#)).

A short retrospective

To clarify the analysis, it would be pertinent to split down in a few distinctive periods the recent history of information technology and the individual empowerment process brought by the personal computers. Here is what can be proposed:

DIY culture and pure nerdism (1976 – 1984)

At this early stage, personal computing was a hobby for most. Enthusiasts assembled their own machines, programmed their own code and exchanged their experiences with their peers at the 'homebrew' computer clubs. It was also when the first companies in the PC industry started, such as Altair, Apple and Microsoft; but with products focused to the niche market of 'nerds' and 'techies'.

Real-life applications and machines (1984 – 1990)

With the launch of the Apple Mac in 1984, non-techies found their way into the benefits of the information technology. Graphical user interfaces (GUI) and applications such as word processors and spreadsheets initiated a swift from an exclusively nerdy culture to a results-oriented use of the personal computer. Even the text-based and harder to use IBM PC platform got its adepts in the office marketplace.

Windows embracing the "rest of us" (1990 – 1993)

In 1990 the first working version of Microsoft Windows was released, emulating the success of the Mac GUI six years previously. Although Apple created "the computer for the rest of us" motto, in 1984, it was Microsoft who profited the most. Through a series of strategic mistakes (proprietary technology, no licence agreements,

higher prices than competition and a strict bundling policy of hardware and operational system), Apple lost its enormous PC market share of the early days of the Apple IIs. It was Microsoft, with its strategy of "embracing and extend", who actually took over "the rest of us", in a time when hardware prices dropped to acceptable levels for most middle-class households in developed countries. It was the foundations of its actual 94.1% of the Graphical OS market share and the domination of 85% of the office applications industry (14).

Nonetheless those were the golden years when the personal computing industry formed a critical mass of users. Allied to the convergence of telecommunications and media industries, this epoch built the foundations of the techno-utopians' ideals.

Net Utopia and cyber-liberalism: the Wired era (1993 – 1998)

And suddenly, by giving away to the private sector the public Internet backbone - a result of over 30 years of investment with US tax-payers' funds – the American government turns an academic and military network into the "information marketplace": the new business frontier for any Republican post-industrialist CEO. For a half decade we have been listening to Wired's libertarian campaign against state control in cyberspace, featuring Gilder, Tofflers and alike. But, as the saying goes: "you can fool some of the people all of the time and all of the people some of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time".

Technorealism (1998 -)

And some people soon realised it. Early this year, a small group of intellectuals led by Andrew Shapiro, David Shenk and Steven Johnson initialised a movement called "technorealism". With an eight-point manifesto subscribed by thousands in their website (15), one finds it hard to contest the obvious and clear conclusions. Many see it as the natural antidote to the cyber-liberalism age. As Andrew Shapiro puts it, "we want to criticise technology with the view of improving it. I'm not anti-technology by any means, but I find myself at odds with the boosterism of Silicon Valley and, well, Wired magazine." (16)

Reality Shock

Technologies are not neutral.

The Internet is revolutionary, but not Utopian.

Government has an important role to play on the electronic frontier.

Information is not knowledge.

Wiring the schools will not save them.

Information wants to be protected.

The public owns the airwaves; the public should benefit from their use.

Understanding technology should be an essential component of global citizenship.

The above principles of technorealism were not created overnight and a visit to *www.technorealism.org* will give a further explanation on each of them. One of the reasons for Barbrook and Cameron's "The Californian Ideology" wide acceptance was that many others were already thinking about it, under one perspective or another. Then, when a profound analysis is presented the public identification is immediate. The same has happened with the technorealism movement in one way

or another prior to the term being coined.

Even before Wired existed, Time magazine published in its "Letters to the editor" section a complaint from an irate parent who decided to buy a modem so his 12 year old son could get connected to the Internet. His action was based on a very favourable article, published in a preceding issue of the magazine, where all the educational potential of the web and all the resources available were outlined. The reason for the reader's anger was that just a few days after getting "wired", the kid managed to find a way to exchange some pornographic pictures and was spending most of his time on it. "How can you induce us to give our children access to the web, if all this immoral stuff is also out there?" was the question posed to the journalist responsible for the article. The reply came straight after: "the Internet is by no means different than the real world. All the good and bad things your children can find in the streets will be found in cyberspace. You'll have to teach them how to be careful in the same way you do in real life". Six years later this could be a classical example of the technorealist's principle number 2. "For every empowering or enlightening aspect of the wired life, there will also be dimensions that are malicious, perverse, or rather ordinary", is partly how they explain why the Internet is not utopian.

By the sum of experiences over those early years of broader Internet access and by keeping a balanced critical position between the techno-utopians and the neo-Luddites it was possible to formulate a few common sense pillars.

It is completely unnecessary to exemplify all the principles of technorealism, and most of them speak for themselves, but one (principle 3), in particular, brings to light one of the biggest aberrations of the liberals quest: free market with no government intervention. There is no single company in the computer industry that is not concerned about Microsoft's monopolistic tactics. From small to large corporations, Microsoft is a threat to market diversity and innovation. Nowadays, the dream of any start-up company is to be bought by Microsoft, since they know that, in the current scenario, if Microsoft decides to move into their business they will be out of the game. The irony in this is that everyone is hoping to have a chance in the free market economy (as propagated by the Liberals) with fair competition but, in order to get there, Microsoft has to be broken up or, at least, regulated. Who is going to do it? The market itself? Left alone to market forces, Microsoft already defeated most of the leading companies in the IT business, including Borland (development tools), Corel (application suites), Novell (networking) and Apple (operational systems/platform), either by sweeping them out of the market or to a distant second place. Everyone's hope now is exclusively on a lawsuit moved by the US Government's Department of Justice (DoJ). Yes, the very same government to whom Wired and the cyber-libertarians say "hands off".

A dark future?

In *Rewired*, David Hudson dedicates almost one hundred pages to a section entitled "One Dark Future", compromising not less than 10 of the book's 35 chapters. What we can easily be led to think now is that if all the optimist view and hype on how the Net would give humankind a spectacular future is disappearing, the only path ahead is a dark future.

Not necessarily! The Internet will indeed bring a number of great things to humankind and a number of new problems as well. Although it will expand our access to information, it will not automatically give us a better education; it might give us more freedom of speech, but will not turn each of us into a publisher neither jeopardise the media titans; and it will also shorten the distance between citizens and government, but will not substitute a representative congress or an elected head of government.

The Internet will certainly create a number of problems that are only now beginning to appear, ranging from privacy issues to information anxiety and cyber-crimes. Should we then step back and cut down the Internet? Some people are proposing it, such as Paul Treanor in an extensive paper published on the Web called "Internet as Hyper-Liberalism" (17), but that is just another extremism and

goes blindly into the other side of the spectrum. Just like any revolution the Internet will bring many expectations and fears and only time will allow things to settle down. When, in 1906, Alberto Santos Dumont flew with his *14 Bis*, the world's first aircraft to take off and land by its own means, great expectations were also created and many of the problems could not be foreseen at the time. Dumont himself did not accept the fact that the aeroplane, an invention with the purpose of bringing people together, soon ended up being used during the First World War to kill other human beings.

A more recent example comes from David Sarnoff, founder of NBC and president of RCA, the man who unveiled the first colour television in 1939. Like many in that time, Sarnoff saw the new invention as a force for truth, refined culture and national edification. In 1940 he declared confidently that television was "destined to provide greater knowledge to larger numbers of people, truer perception of the meaning of current events, more accurate appraisal of men in public life, and a broader understanding of the needs and aspirations of our fellow human beings." ([18])

It is not hard to see the similarities between Sarnoff's perception of the television role in our society and what has been said about the Net. Although enriching and cultural programs do exist, most of the broadcasting time is now devoted to consumerism, political apathy, social isolation and cultural imperialism. Far from a modern Agora, electronic media has become one of the best examples of savage capitalism. But that does not invalidate its importance and, when properly produced and diffused, television programs can partially achieve some of Sarnoff's ideals.

Richard Barbrook's defined so well: "The Net is nothing but an inert mass of metal, plastic and sand. We are the only living beings in cyberspace." Yes, like almost every technological achievement in history, the Internet will change human society irreversibly, but at the end it is just another tool. Will the changes be good or bad? The answer is both.

Epilogue

In May 1998, after failing twice in attempts to offer its stock on the public market, Wired Ventures sold its magazine to Conde Nast Publications Inc. for more than $75 million. The deal not only symbolised Wired's financial failure (the money was used to pay Wired Venture's short-term debts and to fund its online counterparts HotWired, Wired News and the HotBot search engine) but also how the magazine should be perceived in the future. The acquirer, apart from being an investor in the publication since January 1994, is also the publisher of lifestyle periodicals such as *Vogue*, *GQ*, *The New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair*. In other words, it is now clear why Armani Jeans and BMW adverts fit so well on the magazine's pages. Wired may very well have a long life, but it will be nothing more than a cyber-fashion magazine for the top 2% wealthiest Internet users.

The rest of us will just wear unbranded jeans, take the tube to work and face all the joys and problems of everyday life. Both inside and outside cyberspace.

References

(1) The term first appeared in a January 1992 article by *Times* reporter John Markoff. It was formed by a blend of the words "digital" and "literati" (Italian for the Latin *litterati*). Today, Markoff states, digerati is a stand-in for "the digital elite" – the powerful engineers, the Third Wave intellectuals, and power brokers of the wired world. (back to the text)

(2) The information space. The place in computer servers, geographically dispersed, and linked by wavelengths. The term was coined by William Gibson in his 1984 novel *Neuromancer* as "consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts… A graphical representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellation of data. Like city lights, receding…"(back to the text)

(3) Negroponte, Nicholas. **Who Will the Next Billion Users Be?**. Wired 4.06, June 1996.(back to the text)

(4) Newt Gingrich's speech to Republican National Committee on 20 January 1995. http://dolphin.gulf.net/Gingrich/1.20.95.I . (back to the text)

(5) Dyson, Esther. **Release 2.0 A design for living in the Digital Age**. Viking, London, 1997. Page 6. (back to the text)

(6) author's notes. (back to the text)

(7) Stahlman, Mark. **The English Ideology and Wired Magazine – Part One**. Rewired website. http://www.rewired.com/96/fall/1118.html. (back to the text)

(8) Paraphrase of the opening sentences of Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852; repr. in *Karl Marx: Selected Works*, vol. 2, 1942). The actual words were: "Hegel remarks somewhere that all great, world-historical facts and personages occur, as it were, twice. He has forgotten to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce." (back to the text)

(9) **ibid**. page 5 (back to the text)

(10) http://www.wolfenet.com/~danfs/newt.html. (back to the text)

(11) author's notes (back to the text)

(12) http://www.hotwired.com/market/96/23/index1a.html. (back to the text)

(13) Shenk, David. **Data Smog: surviving the information glut**. HarperCollins, New York, 1997. Pages 173-174. (back to the text)

(14) For an in-depth analysis of Microsoft's monopoly strategies, refer to Millarch, Francisco. **Monopolies x Open Standards: An Abridged History of the Personal Computer Industry and its influence on the Cyberspace**. 1998. http://www.millarch.org/francisco/papers/monopolies.htm. (back to the text)

(15) For more information, see www.technorealism.org. (back to the text)

(16) Christe, Ian. **Digital Dream Team Calls for 'Technorealism'**. Wired News. 12 March 1998. http://www.wired.com/news/news/culture/story/10872.html. (back to the text)

(17) http://www.inter.nl.net/Paul.Treanor/net.hyperliberal.html. (back to the text)

(18) Sarnoff, David, Foreword to Lenox R. Lohr. **Television Broadcasting**. New York. MacGrawHill. 1940. *in* Shenk, David. **Data Smog: surviving the information glut**. (back to the text)