Whose Net Is It Anyway?

I DON'T WATCH TELEVISION ALL THAT OFTEN, but lately when I do it seems as though half the commercials are trying to convince me that some company—Microsoft, AT&T, MCI, IBM, it doesn't really matter who—deserves my undying gratitude, or at least my consumer dollars, for their indispensable civilization-enhancing role in creating the Internet.

Now, maybe I'm just turning into one of those old fogies for whom the world is on a steady downward spiral, but I have to say this isn't the way I remember it happening. The fact is, most of those companies were essentially unaware of the Net for the first 15 or so years of its development, and the rest worked actively to try to prevent anything like a global open Internet from being born, out of fear that it would undermine their proprietary lines of business.

Well, OK, you might say, so these companies have PR flacks with active imaginations. That's hardly a crime, nor even all that unusual. If soft drink advertisements can suggest that their products promote world peace or phenomenal athletic achievements, what's the harm in telecom companies suggesting they built the Internet? It's just business as usual, right?

Unfortunately, misleading commercials aren't always harmless. When corporate polluters advertise the wonderful things they are doing for the environment, they can muddy the public debate and make it harder to reach consensus about fixing genuine problems. Similarly, if John Q. Public believes the Internet was invented by a few Fortune 500 companies, he may be more easily swayed when those companies, in their pursuit of Internet-related profits, find themselves at odds with the deeper needs of society.

The longer I look at the way the Internet works, the more I believe that the best way to think about the Internet is as a global ecosystem. The analogy is worth taking some time to understand, as it has profound implications for Internet governance and public policy.

THE ESSENCE OF THE NET IS INTERCONNECTION: its value increases exponentially with the number of people and computers it connects. Thus, there's a very powerful dynamic at work, driving us towards a world in which nearly every person and computer are interconnected by a single complex thing we call the Internet. In the long run, although there will be a few networks that remain completely separate for reasons of security or privacy, nearly everyone on the planet will be connected to this single complex whole system. Like the complex whole system that is our planet's ecology, the Internet grew and evolved in separate pieces, without a visible master plan. Like the planetary ecology, the Internet is so all-encompassing that opting out of it is not a realistic option for most people, Biosphere Two or proprietary networks notwithstanding.

The fact that there's only one ecosystem means that society feels a need to impose restrictions on individuals and corporations in the name of a greater good. A chemical-producing factory can't arbitrarily pollute "its" air, because all the air on the planet ultimately mixes together and affects everyone. The ecosystem is a global commons, not privately owned, and therefore it is (or should be)

Like the complex whole system that is our planet's ecology, the Internet grew and evolved in separate pieces, without a visible master plan.

Should we be any more sanguine about trusting the future of the Internet to a corporate techno-oligarchy than we would be about placing the future of the environment in the hands of Exxon, Union Carbide, and their peers?

administered as a public trust.

Similarly, if the long-term dynamic of computer networks is, as now appears likely, to tend towards ever more universal integration, then in the long run there's only one Internet, only one cyberspace, in which ownership rights must ultimately be tempered by social needs. Your right to protect your children when they're using your computer at home might be fundamentally limited by my right to openly discuss issues of sexuality with my peers on the Internet. Conversely, my right to free speech might be limited by the harm that could come from using my Web page to post simple recipes for weapons of mass destruction. In an extremely diverse world, we will have to come to terms with the fact that we're all using the same Net, and that our usage is going to have to be governed by some sort of norms and rules.

HOW ARE WE GOING TO DECIDE ON THE SOCIAL norms for the Internet? In the absence (for better or worse) of a legitimate global government, legal regulation would be particularly slow and cumbersome, probably requiring new international treaties and organizations in an area where technology can change everything in a few months. Yet the absence of any likely effective government control creates a noticeable power void, and those television commercials are the "giant sucking sound" of corporate titans rushing to fill it. Much of what the Fortune 500 does on the Internet will no doubt be very good, but should we be any more sanguine about trusting the future of the Internet to a corporate techno-oligarchy than we would be about placing the future of the environment in the hands of Exxon, Union Carbide, and their peers? Who will look beyond today's bottom line to ask about the kind of Internet we are creating for our grandchildren?

It was these troubling and difficult questions, hammered home by current flash points such as the 1997 disputes over who controls the Domain Name System (DNS), that led Computer Profes-

sionals for Social Responsibility (CPSR) to choose 1998 as its Year of Internet Governance. CPSR's goals for this year are to raise the general level of awareness about the importance of these issues, and to help begin the process out of which answers will emerge over time. But how, in the absence of any governing authority, central ownership, or management, can we begin to forge a consensus about the way the Internet should be administered in the long run?

Our approach has been to start with first principles. To the extent that order is slowly emerging from chaos in the areas of global politics and environmental policy, it is because there have been some foundational documents around which consensus has begun to emerge. In the political sphere, such documents include the Magna Carta, the U.S. Declaration of Independence, and the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights. In the environmental sphere, the writings of John Muir, Rachel Carson, and others have similarly shaped our thinking. The first step in CPSR's campaign for Internet governance, accordingly, has been the drafting of what we hope will prove to be such a foundational document, a statement of principles for the Internet era.

AS IT TURNS OUT, THE INTERNET—CHAOTIC and unstructured though it appears to be— already had in place the ideal mechanisms for drafting, debating, publishing, and agreeing upon such a document. Within the chaos that is the Internet, standards have been made by an extremely open process in which draft documents are published, comments are solicited from anyone in the world, and revisions are made until consensus is reached. CPSR chose to use this process to write its statement of principles in the belief that it would encourage the widest possible participation and confer the most possible legitimacy on the resulting document. There's still plenty of room for comments. The goal is a document that can stand the test of time as fundamental principles to under-

lie a global consensus on the governance and administration of the Internet.

Some of the principles may seem at first reading to be either vague or obvious, but this is misleading. To the extent that the principles are intended to be universal, it is probably a good thing that they appear "obvious" to many people who have already thought long and hard about Internet issues. To the extent that they appear vague, it is because they are intended to guide and inform specific situations and problems long into the future. The document is not, by any means, an attempt to avoid taking specific stands on the hard issues of the day, such as content filtering or DNS administration. Rather, it is an attempt to identify the broad general principles that should inform our thinking about these ongoing flash points.

The issues related to Internet governance are too important, with too many long-range consequences, for readers to stay on the sidelines. The Internet is not a flash in the pan; our grandchildren will find a world without the Internet as inconceivable as we find a world without electricity. Will their Internet promote free speech and tolerance for diversity? Will it seek to enforce one group of users' set of values on everyone else? Will it be governed, ultimately, by anything more important than the bottom line of the big telecommunication and software companies? The answer is up to us. I urge all readers to play a role in making sure the Net of the future is the Net we want to leave behind as our legacy.

The draft statement of principles, "One Planet, One Net: Principles for the Internet Era," along with information on CPSR's campaign for Internet governance, can be found at www.cpsr.org/program/nii/onenetindex.html. Comments and discussion are invited from everyone. ▣

NATHANIEL BORENSTEIN (nsb@fv.coms) is a special director of Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility.