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Media-Space! Opening Speech

Peter Lamborn Wilson

28th February 1997

Up till a few years ago—no, up till last year, well, up till ten minutes ago—there was a very religious feeling surrounding the Internet. I call it the mumbo-jumbo factor, a kind of magical aura that surrounds any new technology. There is an old saying that any technology that you don't understand is like magic. In other words, how many people could fix that television if it broke? Maybe there are actually a few people here who could do that. But, by and large, it is magic. The Internet is so new, the computer itself is so new that it has this kind of magic aura, a halo around it. Out of that feeling, there came certain expectations that were almost messianic: the feeling that the Internet was going to save us, that the Internet was out of control (that's the title of a very popular book). Because it was out of control, that no government could control it, just by existing it was going to be a factor for liberation. Over the last few of years, there were a number of conferences and a number of publications and quite a lot of thinking along these lines.

It turns out that that there were two different kinds of people who had these expectations. One is what we call in

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America “extropians,” people who think that the machine is the next stage of evolution, and that the intelligent machine will somehow replace human intelligence. This is science fiction. It might be; one never likes to make predictions about technology. Maybe someday there will be artificial intelligence. But there certainly isn’t any now. In fact, the question is whether there is any un-artificial intelligence.

The other type of person who talked about the Net as freedom basically had an antigovernment line. The idea was that the Internet could not be controlled by government. It was somehow going to create this wonderful anarchy in the world just by existing, just because of the strange horizontal network aspect where there is no control center for the Internet.

When you come to think of it, all communications systems are out of control in this way, including language. Language itself, after all, is the original communications technology, and language is out of control. Governments try to control language, especially in the 20th century, but they find finally that language is out of control. There are always poets, there are always people who use language in creative ways. I don’t mean people who write poetry as uneven lines on the page. I mean poets in the ancient Greek sense of the word: creative people.

The idea that the Internet would free us from government actually meant that it would give us to capital. In other words, if government can’t control the Net, then it should be free as a space for money to circulate freely. In this sense, the Internet is really just a mirror of capitalism, or capitalism if you want to use the old term. I don’t like to like to say capitalism because I don’t think it is an ideology anymore. In the 20th century...I think the 20th century is over, it ended in 1989 or perhaps in 1991... the 20th century was the century of government. The 21st century began with the collapse of communism in the USSR and the idea that now there is only one true force in the world, and that force is capital. It may look very different

world every day. I can't even tell you how many zeros go in to making the figure one trillion. It is just a virtual figure to me, it doesn't mean anything. These are the kind of changes: from 40% to 94.2%. It is one of these curves. If you look at other curves—economic and social curves—they probably also follow this kind of trajectory in the last five years. It is very hard to keep up it this. It's hard to have the facts and it is even harder to have the consciousness.

I think there is very interesting work ahead of us in places like this. A "think tank" is perhaps not the right word. I don't know what the word is, really. That is the kind of thing. We must put our hearts and heads and souls together and work on this because other wise we are going to be left behind. We will live in a world where we don't have any choice to even consider strategic possibilities. Many people already live in that world, the former Third World, perhaps. Zones of exclusion.

That is my anti-pessimistic message. But there is something to do, at least, and that something is very interesting. Whether that will save us or not, I doubt also. But, after all, one must live one's life some way and not just lie around by the side of the swimming pool wearing mirror shades.

That is how I see the future for Public Netbase and for all the other interesting radical centers or non-centers concerned with communications technologies. I think it should expand beyond just the Internet and should become a study and a critique of all communication and communications theory. That is a very busy work proposition and it will keep us from being bored. I hope.

Thank you.

in Europe, I should really only speak about America. In America, the perception is that capital itself is free, is liberated. It no longer has to deal with communism or with any aspect of the social movement. All the arrangements, the deals that were made between capital and various other forces in the world are finished. In America, for example, there was a deal made with the working class in about 1950 or 1948. The deal was basically: we will lift you up, we will make sure that you live well, we will recognize the unions, and the price of this is that you will not become communist. Or religion, for example, was brought into the crusade against godless communism, so a deal was arranged between capital and religion.

Now, after 1991, these deals are not necessary for capital any longer. They do not have to have allies in the struggle against the movement of the social because there is no movement of the social. There are many remnants of the social movement but there is no cohesive resistance against capital unless it might come for government. This is very interesting because the struggle that is now around the Net, to a certain extent, is a struggle between government and capital. You see this in the attempt of governments to censor the Net. This happens in America, but other countries it is much more severe. In Iraq, for example, I understand that there is no Internet access at all. In China, the access is severely restricted, perhaps non-existent. Governments that still consider themselves ideological and strong, that is, the few remaining communists governments or some Islamic governments, they want to censor the Internet. Also the American government would like to be able to censor the Internet.

It seems that, technologically, this is impossible. You cannot finally censor a system that does not have a center. For example, you probably know about the Scientology case where somebody put some secret documents on the Net, and the Scientology Church succeeded in closing down the access company in Finland that had allowed those documents to be pub-

lished. As soon as they did that, in fifty countries around the world the same documents were posted on the Net and they are completely available. You can have a stack like that of secret Scientology documents if you can struggle through such boring crap. Bad science fiction. It was a complete failure. The Church of Scientology can hire as many lawyers as they like. They will never be able to suppress this information. Same thing with McDonald's. The "McLibel" case which has been going on in England for years is the longest court case in English history. That, too, centers around the Internet. No matter how many times McDonald's could succeed in crushing these poor people for telling the truth about their lousy food, somebody else will post the same material.

The Internet is technically out of control but, socially, it is a different matter. There will always be some area of freedom on the Internet but it can be surrounded by vast cyberspace city of high-rise multinational corporations which will dwarf the tiny little settlement of hackers and pioneers and artists. In fact, that little space of freedom where the artist and hackers congregate is even rather useful to capital because it spins out many ideas, it discovers new technologies which capital can use.

The other point is that when the Internet has a few thousand or even a couple of million people on it, most of those people were fairly well informed. Probably most of you belong to that group. But now there are millions and millions and millions of new subscribers to the Internet. As far as they are concerned, it is just another entertainment medium. In America, I would say the average user of the Internet is waiting for America On-Line to come up and is looking forward for some chat-line about their favorite sitcom on television or their favorite music group. They are not interested in freedom or discussing the theories about freedom of information. They are not interested in issues of censorship and control. They are simply interested in being entertained. As the Internet and television

worry about that. Or it's the Arabs, or it's drugs, or something. There is an attempt to find an enemy, to find some kind of focus. There is no enemy in that sense. The enemy is simply the unopposed rule of money over human values. No human being represents that. Think about it. If you are a stockbroker or a currency exchange person, you have your computer programmed to make certain decisions. You don't make those decisions anymore because it is all happening too fast. It is all happening before you can even think. No time, no space. You don't have time to think, so you have your computer programmed to buy and sell.

Who is in control? Actually, nobody is in control. There is not even what you would call a ruling class anymore. I read that 432 people in the world control 50% of the money. Of the 500 wealthiest entities in the world, about 250 of them are not governments. They are corporations. It's a completely different world and it is stupid to act as if it is still 1950. As if the world is split into two opposing camps. This is not the case. It may become the case again. I don't look forward to it myself. I think will be a very, very ugly situation when capital is finally opposed with violence and the anger it deserves. Nevertheless, at the moment, there is no such thing. There is no schizophrenic split in the world.

I would like to see the next year or two devoted to a very intense discussion about that situation. What is the world now? What is the economic situation? What is the political situation in the world? How has it changed radically in the past five six years? To give an example, five or six years ago about 40% of all money in the world was not related to production. It was all related to currency exchange and arbitrage. That figure is now 94.2. 94.2% of the money in the world not only does not exist as cash, but it also bears no relationship whatsoever to production, not even to building computers. Not shoes, not food, nothing. It is just money relating itself to more money. In that system, they say about \$2 trillion moves around the

what the correct tactic would be. I look at the next couple of years as a very interesting period of strategic thinking. I myself do not have any easy answers to this question. I'm looking also. But what I wish to do is to pose the question. I'd like to sharpen the discourse in order to ask the question in a very specific way.

How could we use these new technologies in a strategic overall movement? Yes, I would even use that word: movement. With very specific goals. Empirical goals, not ideological goals. We are not talking about the triumph of an idea. We're not talking about the triumph of a political system or a philosophy, be it capitalism, Marxism, or anarchism even. Each situation has its own strategic necessities and each situation will have to be approached in a situational manner to decide what power there might be in that situation. Some people use the word "self-empowerment". That sounds perhaps more New Age, softer than the word "power". But I'm not afraid of the word "power". I think that this is what we're looking for. Power. Yes, power for ourselves, not power over other people. Not power over money, or power over God or over fate or over anything. Power for ourselves, yes, self-empowerment, but it's still power. In this search, we must make us of whatever weapons or tools lie to hand.

I think I like to say that I'm not an optimist because that would be fatuous and stupid. And I'm not a pessimist because that would be even more fatuous and more stupid. I do like to say that I'm an anti-pessimist. This at least leaves open a few doors. I would like to make a call for an "international non-centered think tank" kind of activity: more conferences, more meetings, more talk on the Net, about strategy and about the basic situation that we find ourselves in. There are people living as if it were still 1989. In America, we have the right wing who no longer have communism to worry about so they are worrying about the U.N. They have just taken all that old communist symbolism and pasted it on the U.N. so that they can

come together, which is what is happening now, with systems such as point-to-point or pointcasting as it is called a program can be designed just for you. You can have your own channel that will entertain you. Intelligent search engines will go and look up the kind of news or entertainment you are interested in and feed it to you everyday along with little advertisements that run in the upper right-hand corner at the same time, thus proving that human being can do two things at once. They can read news and look at advertisements at the same time. It is a great step forward.

The future of the Internet in this sense is simply to become a mirror of capital because capital, like the Internet, has no borders. If capital discovers that shoes can be made more cheaply in Indonesia, Taiwan or Mexico, they take the shoe factory there. The jobs in New York, Chicago or Vienna go away. There is no border for capital. In the same way, there is no border for the Internet. If I send e-mail to somebody in Finland, it is the same. It practically costs the same to send mail to someone in my neighborhood in New York. So there are no borders on the Internet. If the Internet is out of control, so is capital. There is no center for capital. There is no hope of capital. There is no king of capital. There are just 200 or 300 major corporations fighting it out for the market. We could probably map this mathematically as a pure chaos. Capital is a pure chaos. Well, so is the Internet.

In my opinion, any technology has this mirror relationship with the society or the economic reality that brings it into existence. Technology doesn't come from God. Technology doesn't come from outer space. We human beings make technology, and then technology makes us, and then we make more technology, and then that influences us, and so on and so forth in a very complex multiple feedback situation which essentially a chaos. What I see now is that the problem is that the people who are interested in an "Internet activism"—people who look on the Internet as a revolutionary possibility or tool—must ask

themselves where they are going to situate their work or desire in this context of the mirror of capital, this mirror of production as Baudrillard said in an early book before he became a hopeless pessimist.

The question is, to a certain extent, which side are you on? Are you going to go with capital? Are you capitulate to capital and accept the comfortable world that capital offers to people like you and me? Because we are very privileged people. We don't live in Iraq. Or the other alternative: are we going to reinvent ourselves in some kind of oppositional framework? Are we going to be the opposition to capital?

Right now, capital presents itself as a single world, a globe. They talk about global markets. The neoliberal idea is that there is a global market and that money should be free within this system. As far as they are concerned, there is only one world. There is no Second World. That was communism. So, certainly, there is no Third World, because if you don't have a Second, you certainly can't have a Third. It is one world and, in that world, there are areas of inclusion, there are areas of exclusion. There are areas of security, there are areas of depletion, of debt, of sucking away all vitality. The world will be divided on this basis. Instead of two clashing ideologies, there will be simply capital and that which is excluded from capital. Including even perhaps government. This is a very curious business. As an old anarchist myself, it is difficult to make this mental adjustment: that it is no longer government that is the number one problem. In fact, in a strange kind of way, there may even be political possibilities. I don't want to say more about this because it is very fuzzy in my mind. The future is going to be very strange indeed. We are now beginning the 21st century. Most people are so tied to the clock that they haven't realized that yet. They think that the 21st century will begin in 2000 or 2001, but it has already begun and it is really just getting under way. As we go into this new century and into this new situation, we have to

ask ourselves, as workers in media, which of these directions are we going to go.

That doesn't mean that if I decide to oppose capital that I necessarily mean that I would physically or politically remove myself entirely from the flow of money. You can't do anything without money. So that is impossible. But it does mean that I would have a strategy. I would have not just have tactical thinking but some kind of overall strategy with a long term goal to oppose the injustice and imposed debt that capital sees as our future. In this case, I think that the Internet will take on a new meaning. We know it is not going to save our souls. We can be pretty sure that we are not going to be replaced by intelligent machines. That would solve a lot of problems, of course. We could all just retire to Florida and enjoy ourselves. But now I'm afraid we're stuck in the human condition. We could either capitulate and become part of that comfortable world, or we could somehow move into opposition.

Moving into opposition doesn't mean giving up any potential certain strategic advantage. In this sense, all technology represents potential strategic advantage. It is not a question of giving up the Internet. I think it is more about growing up around the idea of the Internet not as a divine answer to our problems, not as a magical system which will help us to achieve freedom simply by existing, but as a tool like a hammer or something even simpler like a stick with a sharpened point, going back to the earliest tools that human beings used. As long as we can see the Internet from this perspective and not expect it to save us and not expect us to save it either, but simply to be aware of it and its possibilities as a tool, then it could become very interesting for those who wish to be in opposition to capital. Of course, it will also continue to be a tool for capital. The situation on the Net will not be clear. It will not be clear which is the good and which is the evil side. It's not going to be like that. Each situation is going to be different. We have to bring in a strategic awareness so that we can decide in each situation