

How We Lost the Internet

PERRY GLASSER

WHEN THE VIRTUAL VIEW column first appeared in *The North American Review*, the World Wide Web was raw and directionless. That initial essay's title included the phrase, "Cyber Frontier" because, like a lot of other people, I was excited by the notion that marginal communities might spontaneously arise and electronically find their individual members. After a generation of passive television viewing, the promise of an interactive medium that enabled dialogue between broadcaster and audience seemed revolutionary and imminent. Even more enchanting for this Baby Boomer who came of age when disinformation and blank-stared lying cemented the collusion among business, politicians and mass media, the likelihood that unfiltered information and opinion could immediately circle the world was a tantalizing possibility, rife with danger but nevertheless thrilling for its potential. If you shared the mind-set that "they" controlled too much and "we" needed to control more, the advent of the Internet meant that in the never-before-seen untrammelled arena of ideas, Truth might finally find a level playing field. Triumph seemed inevitable.

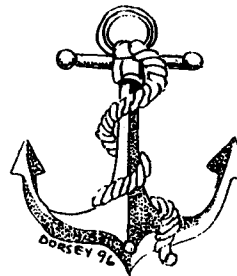
The victory party has been postponed.

Make no mistake: the Internet will change the world profoundly and permanently. No aspect of life in the industrial world will remain unaffected by digital upheaval. But if true revolutions require a transformation of the power structure, this revolution is all but lost. Greet

the new boss; he's the same as the old boss.

THE INTERNET WAS LOST the day Lou Gerstner, Chairman and CEO of IBM Corporation, was presented with "all this wonderful technology," and Gerstner asked his task force "What's a customer going to do with it?" Gerstner's recollection is that that moment marked the instant when the Internet was twisted to the purposes of Business. "That's where [sic] we really began to believe that every physical transaction in the world was going to be augmented or replaced by a digital transaction." (*Business Week*, Dec. 14, 1999) It ought also to be remembered by the rest of us as the moment when "users" became "customers" and "Internet communities" became "customers who bought the same product."

How did this happen? Remember that the Internet was built at public expense. Remember, too, that the earliest incarnations of the Internet mostly connected universities to other universities—not business to business or military installation to military installation. Unless you are blessed with selective memory disorders, you will recollect when the controlling metaphor for the Internet, repeated *ad nauseum*, was "the information super-highway," a happy image for Americans in love with freedom, their cars and distances. The politically astute will notice that for pols—people who traffic in the organization, distribution and use of power—the road metaphor has vanished. It's not that the gaggle of tired, white, mid-



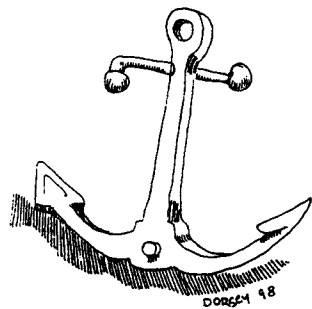
dle-aged men recommending themselves for national office have developed stylistic sensibility and so are abandoning a cliché; rather, the idea of a road suggests universal access, variegated traffic and diverse destinations.

But the largest contributors to political war chests find that implication unacceptable. They are discomfited by the idea that the broadcast capability of the Web and Internet are for Every Man and Woman. So they've erected toll booths and constructed private lanes. Any of us who envisioned liberated netizens of an electronic global village speaking each to each are being smeared into cyber roadkill by the runaway juggernaut at 100 mph barreling down the information superhighway, Commerce.

While the motives for this phenomenon are tiresomely familiar, the tactics are novel. Since an informed populace is difficult to deceive and near impossible to sell to, the purveyors of once free information are declaring their products to be proprietary: The New York Stock Exchange is investigating whether the news of stock price quotations can be sold—not shares of stock, mind you, just the news of price fluctuations. Most of us are chagrined to learn that we are powerless to control or even participate in the hourly commerce that barter and sells all manner of information about who we are and what we do. Our lives are more or less our own to live as we please, but it's discomfiting to realize that when the knowledge of those myriad choices that make up a life become a commodity, our ownership of our lives is inevitably diluted. Privacy is a thing of the past.

BLAMING THE BUSINESS community for being opportunistic is like blaming infants for crying or fish for swimming. It is what it is. Business people are seldom clever and only rarely original. But they

are there and they are ready. With a few outstanding exceptions, such as Gerstner, the captains of industry are a frightened, stupid and slow lot, imprisoned in corporate cultures that greet change and risk with all the joy a fart meets in a



crowded elevator. Hoopla surrounds visionary business leaders precisely because vision in business is so scarce. In what other social milieu can hucksters of assorted ilk make a living selling expensive courses or spacey manuals on creativity, leadership, time management and collaboration? These are skills pursued by the Cub Scouts and should be thoroughly understood by anyone who has survived high school, yet if you slap the word "Executive" in front of those terms, legions of self-conscious corporate drones will line up to enroll, eager ready to pay as much as \$10,000 for a week of falling blindfolded into their colleagues' arms or cooperatively crossing a gorge using nothing but a rope. Such business people could not be expected to have grasped the significance of the Web until long after it was plain to children.

HOW DID "WE" LOSE to such a sorry lot? By default, of course. The Internet was not seized by Business. Rather, it was abandoned by professors, artists and activists still enamored of causes irrelevant to their times.

Unlike the people who trade in power and money, the people who wrestle to understand meaning and consequence have turned blind eyes and unreceptive minds to anything that seems so quickly mastered by youth. Smug with their mastery of centuries-old media, over caffeine-free drinks in smokeless rooms they persisted in arguing over the relevance to literature or gender politics the social analysis of a 19th century German economist. Meanwhile, Marx's economic theories that identified the sources of wealth in an industrial age to be the ownership of land,

labor and capital were being rewritten for a more digital time, becoming knowledge, bandwidth and connectivity.

Rather than imagine new forms and make the Internet our own, our team debated itself into quaint irrelevancy. Where's the fun of pontificating on the nature of alienation in a world where networks are pervasive, in a media where gender is invisible, where literature is an interactive dialogue? Better to argue over the nature of first and second wave Feminism, for example, than to take the trouble as thought-leaders who make certain to turn new technologies to account and benefit women. Where's the conversation about how the geographically dispersed workplace and telecommuting has the potential to change parenting more deeply than any phenomenon since women refused to leave the work force after World War II? Which intellectuals are wary that telecommuting and the cottage industries of pre-industrial cloth-makers seem oddly alike?

THE INTERNET'S LOSS was neither inevitable nor irreversible, but it is damned sad. Many NAR readers may nod their heads knowingly, but this is no time to close this magazine with a sigh, exit the University library, pull your rough-woven serape closer around your shoulders, don your Birkenstocks and visit again your favorite organic sandwich shop to linger over a sprout-laden seven-grain bread veggie sandwich and commiserate with like-minded friends that the corporations are, once more, ruining everything—and what is worse, that dope Glasser thinks this is news. It is simply too easy to take this moment in history and understand it as one that validates a world-view formed a generation past. The '60s commune may be long gone, but its residents reside still in safe harbors called "the campus" and in the odd community in places once-thought cheap and remote, now suddenly trendy and grown pricey, such as Santa Fe or the entire state of Montana.

To embrace what was new would have required risk and effort, but the Internet was lost because contemporary intelligentsia identifies itself with polite leisure. While more than one self-inflated professional intellectual forced to teach six or nine hours each week suckled at the breast of the University likened the lot of artists in the U.S. in the last half of the 20th century to that of Renaissance artists patronized by the Popes and Medicis (humbly accepting the tacit comparison to the artists of that time), a host of mediocrities

seized control of a new medium. The only group to embrace the Web more slowly than business are artists and campus intellectuals, preoccupied with weeping in their herbal tea about the loss of the National Endowment of the Arts grants programs or grumbling that the charitable largesse of Bill Gates and his ilk seems always in some way designed to expand the use of computers in classrooms rather than, say, endowing poetry centers. Where's the equivalent statement to Gerstner's among poets? Who choreographs for Web-casts? How

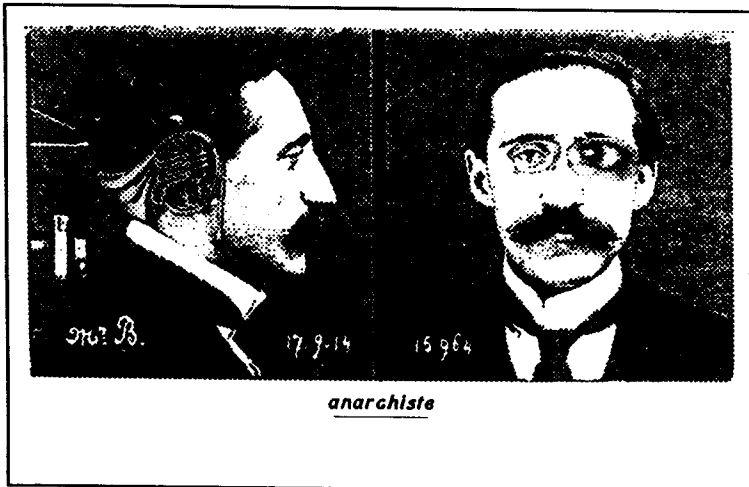
many visual artists are exploring their art through the use of digital tools, or are we going to accept that the digital visual arts means no more than life-like dinosaurs in film or epic adventures of animated toys? Is there serious digital music being created? What does it sound like? When the steam engine was new, Bach wrote for the calliope. Who has posted the portal Web site enabling the audience for the Arts to come together online, join hands in celebration and raise their voices to sing? I want to log onto a Web site created by an artist who understands Java and Shockwave and invents her own technologies and presents me with morphing imagery able to move me while it makes me understand anew a shared basic human experience; I want the music at that Web site to be strange and wonderful and provocative; I want to have interactive opportunities at that Web site so that no two people experience the site in quite the same way; I want links from that Web site so that when I mouse my way from one marvelous page to the next, I create a narrative order that has profound meaning; and I want that when I return to this Web site a second and third time, I will discover nuances and possibilities I had not seen before.

Of course, I write this out of certain convictions no longer universally accepted and, in some circles, under attack; that the purpose of the Arts is to illuminate and enrich the human experience; that however dark, unknown, changing and inchoate, a universal human experience exists; that human experience can and even must be communicated across the lines of our obvious physical differences; that the product of the Artist must be readily accessible to an audience; and that while the expression of the Artist embodies the essence of a time, the Artist speaks to and for an audience beyond that. The new media are being overrun with sharpies and people eager to sell ephemeral stuff; just where the hell is our crowd? □

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DIALECTIC

I can imagine a certain Pierre B.: a true-hearted anarchist insurrectionary musician in Paris in 1871, arrested when the Commune fell (lucky to have survived revanchist slaughter), and initially transported to New Caledonia - where anæmia nearly did him in - then sent back to France in 1877, and locked up in La Mazas.



Meanwhile, one A. Bertillon, an ambitious racist police transcriber, was devising a way for the Prefecture - which feared revolt might revive as Communards completed their sentences - to identify recidivists (*this paragraph is completely factual*), including a milestone in the history of state surveillance: the mug shot.

Was Pierre, perhaps, among those first prisoners photographed by Bertillon, in 1879?

M. KASPER