

# Table of Contents

Special Insert: Net.Politics (The revolution shall not be criticised?) . . . . . 1



# Special Insert: Net.Politics (The revolution shall not be criticised?)

ByMute Editor

## *II The revolution shall not be criticised?*

In response to ISEA98 Micz Flor, organiser of Revolting temporary media laboratory, asks "why now, why revolution?" Is the current popularity of the term and its associated icons anything more than Middle Youth talking to itself in the latest of a long line of fashionable lingos?

## *IV Net.Politics Q&A*

"What does the Net mean for politics?" Anarchists, nazis, extropians, pornographers, sex-crazed teenagers, book-worm teenagers, budgerigar fanatics, isolated octogenarians, hairdressers - you name it, the Net is home to them all. Or is it? Who gains ascendance within cyberspace? Who has the power in this, the latest technological utopia? Is the Net just a tool or is that popular description just another disingenuous trick - the powerful letting the powerless play with hand-me-down toys while they get on with more serious business. We asked a not-so-random selection of net users what they think.

With an introduction by McKenzie Wark

## *X The other Tony B.*

As we watch the social movements of the 21st come into being, we wonder about those of the 20th century. Hari Kunzru talks to Tony Benn about the role of recording and broadcasting technologies in the greater scheme of things.

## *XIV The Nineteenth Century and the future of technocultures in India*

The morning after lasts a long time. India's nuclear detonation has caused a sea change in its political life. It has also highlighted the national schisms and global alliances among the country's different techno-scenes. After the demise of public politics, Ravi Sundaram asks what is taking its place.

## *XX Pancapitalism and Panacers*

Recently, Manuel Castells came to London and talked about his much-praised book *The Rise of the Network Society*. Martin Harris thinks that, if we look closely enough, this star may have more to tell us than his disappointing talk suggested.

## *XXIII Eyes, ears, mouths and media: Cyberns cross the borders of internal exile*

What do you do in war-torn ex-Yugoslavia when you realise that small talk and small media can change lives? Branka Davic, founder of mailing list Cyberns, talks about her experience of networks, political exile and internal emigration.

## **Let's be realistic!**

A blockbuster electronic arts event-slash-symposium called Revolution is unrealistic (link #isea98). Still, it is anything but unexpected. Over the last few years several trends have developed which - if followed through - make the appropriation of such a dramatic word for radical change more understandable.

Firstly, the momentum associated with the social uprising of the late 60s has been transformed into social romanticism and introduced deep into popular culture. The French philosophical and political heritage of '68 has been essential to the kool theories of the 1980s and continues to be fashionable - alongside D&G - in the 1990s (link #The Holy Fools). After the killer cynicism of the last decade, revolution is hip again. Thirty years on in European history, throwing a brick into the social hierarchy has been aestheticised. Throwing the Molotov theme party today does little more than deliver hobby

politics into the social life of Middle Youth.

Political action outside the parliamentary system turned sour in the 70s with an increase in terrorist actions. Radical activism, fundamentalist politics and direct democracy not only split the left outside of the parliamentary system, but also created cracks running deep through elected parties, as was the case with the German Green party in the late 80s and early 90s. Today's romantic attitudes towards the student and workers' riots mean nothing when detached from their political motivations, especially when they are also divorced from their subsequent history. Investigating the assimilation of anti-establishment iconography into the new market strategies might be helpful for understanding some of the recent cultural shifts in the New Britain - but it certainly stalls enthusiasm for revolution<sup>98</sup>...

Secondly, the 'Digital Revolution' has been announced. The fashionable transfer of notions of radical change from the sphere of the social sciences to those of technological advancement makes one question the reliability of the concept of revolution as such. As for revolutionary change within societies: attempts to define a universal check-list for 'The Revolution' have failed. Common sense now tells us that no attempt to describe change in unique and idiosyncratic systems is capable of creating a yardstick for qualifying transformation as revolution.

Where, then, does that leave the 'Digital Revolution'? With no grounds for objective definitions, radical change might best be defined by its subjects. Following the parameters of intersubjectivity, revolution might adequately be described as a dramatic change which forces the individuals within a system to renegotiate their roles. But, from that point of view, it obviously becomes ridiculous to pin down 'a revolution' to an empty technological framework. In the case of The Digital Revolution, then, it is clear that there has not been a revolution for the simple reason that nobody attended.

Finally, the battlegrounds of subversion have allegedly re-located to the digital (and analogue) realms of networked technologies. During the 80s, 'hacking' came to be regarded as a possible cause of atomic war - caused by some fourteen year old playing with a public telephone and a hair clip. Our public space has been extended into networked media, and some nurture the idea that the streets have become altogether obsolete as a battleground for political struggle. Today, some tactical media operations are prime targets of CIA and FBI monitoring activities, seemingly proving the economic threat of such attacks. But, put into perspective, it becomes questionable whether their terrorist action retains any real revolutionary potential.

Some members of the old-time hacker/anarcho scene are currently pulling out of the Internet - dismissing its currency as a tool for radical change. It has been argued that increasing commercialisation has blunted the tool. Relevant points of intervention have been washed away by millions upon millions of AOL supporters. Also, the increasing finesse of networked surveillance in the business sector and the increase of customer and lifestyle databases more than outweigh the dangers of terrorism. So how does the establishment feel about the threat posed by the internet guerrillas? In the form of the Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, it writes that "over time, public sector regulation of content will become increasingly difficult; technology will erode the state's capacity to intervene" (Fourth Report on content regulation in the Internet). Even though this statement does not directly concern itself with subversion from within the networks, it is quite telling that the government's worries are directed towards the future, whereas the small online community of today appears negligible. Hardcore net activists have moved their battlegrounds since the mythical mid 1990s, yet their natural opponent - the state - feels that the real danger is about to come, possibly in 2005 or 2010. It seems more like the eye of the storm than a revolution.

Where does that leave '98? This is certainly neither the time nor the place for biased propaganda and innovative market strategies. Drop the euphoria and let's be realistic...

Revolting hangs up on the Revolution Master Narrative and dials again. Revolting is a temporary media laboratory, built upon new modes of collaborative and process-oriented work in culture, politics, art and media activism. It will extend the social space of the workshop into the digital realm of the Internet and - vice versa - concentrate the free-floating nature of networked technologies by tying them into the social environment of Revolting.

Revolting wants to focus on the realities of media practice. It will test-run the individual and challenging approaches of (politically) motivated concepts for contemporary technologies. Turning 'practice to policy' not only presents promising alternatives to the dominant codes of conduct, but also seems necessary for today's media practice.

**Micz Flor, Manchester 07\_98**  
**Xmicz AT yourserver.co.ukX**  
**[[www.yourserver.co.uk/revolting](http://www.yourserver.co.uk/revolting)]**

(with thanks to Richard Barbrook, Josephine Berry, Martin Conrads and Pauline van Mourik Broekman)

#### **IV Net.Politics and the Virtual Republic**

by McKenzie Wark

net.politics

There are at least three kinds of net.politics - although perhaps there are others not yet invented.

The first kind are struggles that take place outside the Net about how the Net is regulated and run. The struggle over the Communications Decency Act in the United States, for instance. The Net becomes a thing about which there is a public struggle, but a struggle in which it is the traditional spaces of public life that are involved.

A second kind of net.politics are those struggles taking place outside the Net for which the Net becomes a public place of information sharing, decision making and for the relay of calls to action. In the struggle to oust former Indonesian President Suharto, the student democratic movements made good use of net.politics to this end. Denied a place in the public world of the traditional media, the students created their own counter public sphere on the Net, one in which the things that mattered to them as public matters could be named and debated. This had a strong impact on the course of the anti-Suharto campaign, and perhaps pushed other public spaces, such as the ruling Golkar party and the press, to adopt public issues the students had identified.

But there is also a third kind of net.politics, one that is entirely specific to the Net itself. At first sight, it may seem rather insignificant. Net.politics on this scale usually consists of tiny little debates, decisions and squabbles, about things of significance to only a few people who happen to be occupying a particular vector within the Net - the nettime list, for instance. In the long run this microscopic kind of net.politics is potentially the most significant force for change, both within the Net and in public life at large.

What is happening on the Net is that a whole generation is discovering that politics exists. Politics is the life of the polis, the interaction of people, asserting their claims or hearing the claims of others upon them. A public is any assembling of people who engage in the life of the polis, interacting with others to achieve the least bad result for themselves and for others. Net.politics means the creation of new publics, the reinvention of the polis: a bottom up, grass roots creation of a new republic.

By 'bottom up' I don't just mean the activity of the 'free' market. There is an idea some would impose on the Net that this is the only kind of bottom up activity. But the production of different, competing, cooperating kinds of self-motivating activity is a part of net.politics itself. Net.politics is, among other things, a public struggle over what kinds of 'bottom up' process can exist.

The republic is the 'public thing', but it also means the 'public reality'. It is through their interactions in public, as a public, that people nominate what matters to them, and also what is real to them. Net.politics means the creation not only of new publics, but also of new public realities. It's a self education in how to be a citizen who is qualified to leave the 20th century and strike out into the next.

The only thing this kind of net.politics is not about is the recreation of the dream of the 18th century 'public sphere'. If anything, net.politics of this everyday, microscopic kind shows why that was always a myth. People do not come together as universal rational beings in public life. They come together as particular beings with rational, emotional and rhetorical capacities.

Look at the transcript of any news group or listserver and what you see is always something more akin to Jean-Francois Lyotard's proliferating 'language games' than to 'communicative rationality'. And this is no bad thing. There may be many kinds of affective and perceptive skill that republican life requires.

So rather than a public sphere, net.politics creates what I call a virtual republic. Virtual in the sense that the possibility of collective self-invention emerges out of the nomination of public things and the advancement of agendas for action based on the creation of such realities. Net.politics of the smallest and most microscopic kind, little day to day interactions, creates this possibility of imagining, negotiating and implementing futures.

People are teaching themselves how to be citizens again, but not citizens as imagined by state-sponsored civics education, nor as imagined by techno-utopian boosters. Rather, citizenship is reinventing itself for itself, free from ideal models of what it should be like. The results aren't always pretty - a flame war is public life gone wrong. But the potential is slowly, slowly emerging for a new kind of polis, a new kind of public, a new kind of political life. Or, most simply, a new kind of life, for humans are still what Aristotle called *zoon politikon* - the political animal.

**McKenzie Wark** is the author of *The Virtual Republic* (Allen & Unwin).

[[www.mcs.mq.edu.au/~mwark](http://www.mcs.mq.edu.au/~mwark)]

**XMckenzie.Wark AT mq.edu.auX**

### **Douglas Davies**

5:15:23 pm July 21, begin NYC. This morning I sung my song for about 200 artists, digitalists, designers from Kyoto. They dressed and laughed more American than I did. Later I call the White House to confirm that Susan Flynn-Hummel and I can indeed link real and virtual hands across the world on December 31, 1999. We decide to call it "earthshaking". Nobody at the post-Monica White House doubts it. Tonight at dinner Susan and I will refine further the theory of quantum teleportation, which implies an unsponsored visit to the edge of the universe, at least in IBM theory. **THIS LIFE IS MAD**. As William Blake was mad in his songs, as Artaud was mad in his plays, as innovation has always been mad. No, net.politics has no link to any politics we have ever known because the players - the voters - are totally different. More than half the human race, once silent - women - is now vocal. Once they give up trying to behave more boorishly than men, once they lay their own sacred truths upon us, the world will change. They will do it through being-in-communication. I am such a communication hybrid, half here, half there, half man, woman, partly flying brain. So are you. This situation has no precedent in human history and nobody knew it was coming. Shake the past. Study and enjoy, but do not revere it. Neither Michelangelo nor Marx nor Einstein nor Thatcher can provide

any lessons about tomorrow, which is right now. Today is raring to bite or kiss you in your private parts when you least expect it..... 5:36:52pm, July 21, NYC.

**Douglas Davis** is a telecommunications artist and author of *Art and the Future*.  
Sentence, 1994 to infinity  
[[math240.lehman.cuny.edu/art](mailto:math240.lehman.cuny.edu/art)]  
**Xdmd AT echonyc.comX**

See also: "Dialogues with the Machine", p. 8/9

### **Vladimir Muzhesky**

It may sound a little bit far fetched, but I would doubt the authenticity of media as a phenomenon-in-itself. It seems that social institutions, both alternative and mainstream, load media with PR patterns and thus translate what media could have been into what media have to become from the point of view of social law, practice and folk mythology.

Before there is a theory which defines a node-to-socium protocol there is no law we can follow. Before we define ourselves and re-define the area as itself, there is no logic to follow.

Up to now, there has been no content - rather the simulation of yet nonexistent network standards. There are workshops, think tanks, conferences, but there are no axioms, definitions, strategies.

**Vladimir Muzhesky** is an artist.  
**Xbasicray AT thing.netX**

### **Esther Dyson**

While television is a great medium for propaganda, the Net is a great medium for conspiracy. For good or bad, the Net helps fringe opinions find adherents and then gives the adherents a voice. In a world where only the official story is allowed, the Net can be a liberator. In a world where discussion is already free, the Net can be a medium for cranks and crazy theories - but also for debunking them. Thus, in politics, it fosters discussion so that - ideally - consensus can arise. The idea is for ideas to win by making sense and gathering adherents, rather than just by collecting votes without real discussion.

In the end, the Net offers great value because it fosters decentralisation even more than democracy does. The challenge is to keep decentralisation from becoming fragmentation.

**Esther Dyson** is chairman of EDventure Holdings and author of *Release 2.0: A design for living in the digital age* (Penguin/Viking)  
**Xedyson@edventure.comX [www.edventure.com]**

### **Felipe Rodriguez**

Governments struggle to keep pace with the Internet. Numerous attempts at government censorship have failed. Information that is illegal in one country but legal in another can be made available on the Internet, regardless of national law. Governments' attempts to censor information have been circumvented by copying the information to many different locations on the Net.

The individual has gained more freedom of choice to access any resources him/herself, whereas in the past governments had much more power to restrict such choices. But this individual freedom may be temporary. More effective ways to censor information on the Net are being invented and stimulated by our governments. Market forces are granted power to police individuals on the Net under the guise of 'industry self-regulation', preventing publication of information without proper legal procedures.

There is a global coalition of governments trying to restrict the use of strong encryption by individuals, in order to be able to collect and read people's e-mail. Despite the information revolution, we are closer to a Big Brother society than ever before.

There is a growing need for artists, activists and others in every country to protect their privacy, freedom of speech and freedom to access information on the Internet. Become active, become vocal!

**Felipe Rodriguez**  
**Xfelipe AT xs4all.nlX**  
**[www.xs4all.nl]**

### **Geert Lovink**

A Circular Dream on the Cybernetic Situation

The question of net.politics arises after the sound and fury of the commodified spectacle has faded away. Here, besides the void of consumerism, we can ignore dead-end postmodern fatigue and make space for numerous, far more insistent voices. Take the passage through the mirrors of arbitrary identities, styles and gadgets and live the power of electronic certainty. Scattered public discontent is finding new forms of organisation, through a fearlessness towards all forms of control, an indifference to cynical deconstruction and a deter-mination to join forces.

Beyond the dialectics of the 'real' and the 'virtual' there are networked jubilees, tactical gala events, affectionate cyberspatial gatherings, and nastier forms of electronic resistance, all of which are unaffected by the Laws of Infotainment. Hot zones of useless data. But it will take a while to overcome the damage caused by the regime of political correctness. PC's internal policing has installed a culture of suspicion and surveillance, effectively keeping people from expressing their unaccustomed, spasmodic anger as soon as unskirtable contradictions arise.

Currently, dissent is being monitored by NGO and media professionals who have assumed the task of speaking out previously shouldered by political parties, trade unions and 'new' social movements. This type of 'perception management' can easily be smashed or, even better, ignored. Its profound, ongoing misunderstanding of the Net is an encouraging sign. The nomadic hedonism of raves has been contained, like the political rebellion of previous decades, by reducing it to a pop fashion commodity. But, despite these processes, it still has a sting in the tail. Don't believe the (hype of the) Fall. Disillusionment is no longer the tragic end but the 'human condition'. Realism and pragmatism are not just the fall-out of a decayed idealism - they have grown into major ideologies.

There must be ways to exit the logic of the sell-out's eternal return. Transformation should be possible without being absorbed into the culture of business: ways of speaking about processes of 'growth', anti-careerism, sovereign forms of agitation, illegal models of finance, large scale communication guerrilla, mass protests within the boundaries of the Net. Macro politics with dirty hands, supporting a margin of revolutionary spirits, and vice versa.

Politics in the digital age first of all means a widespread awareness of the economic and political conditions under which we communicate. Telematerialism: Kittlerism for the masses, Virilio for president. No cheap promises, no elitist pessimism, no popularist conspiracy talk. Instead, a worldwide campaign (and debate) about standards and protocols. Let us stop complaining about monopolies such as Microsoft, AOL or UUNet. Instead, we can claim bandwidth, hijack satellites, realise free, public content against copyright for the few, frustrate electronic commerce systems.

I know: media activism, old school. Still, there is a need for dialogue, a growing sense of solidarity among media-aware groups and individuals, an urge to stop terrifying state control and corporate takeover, to defend the free territories before it's too late. For in the end, the paper tigers are not that powerful, as Mao used to say. We should not overestimate them: they are real and paper at the same time, and this counts especially in the days of virtuality.

**Geert Lovink is co-moderator** of nettime-l.

**Xgeert AT xs4all.nlX**

[[www.Desk.nl/~nettime](http://www.Desk.nl/~nettime)]

### **Peter Leyden**

Here's the basic dynamic of political economy - straight out of Marx. It's as true now as ever. You change the technology at the basis of a society and it fundamentally changes the economy. When you fundamentally change the economy, it isn't long before the politics begin to change as well. In our era, we've laid down the new technology and the economy is morphing beyond recognition. That's a done deal - it's simply working its way through the global economy from its beachhead in the United States and, now, Northern Europe. So, right on cue, we're starting to see the impact of this new tech and this new economy on politics. The newly empowered players rooted in this new tech and new economy are starting to flex their muscles, play politics and shape the world in their own image. I could point out examples of this all over the place, particularly at ground zero in Northern California. But frankly, I won't. I'd rather point out the next iteration of that dynamic: nothing short of forcing change on a civilisational level. (Why dabble in changing politics? Let's go all the way and change civilisation.) I think the world is now moving to a stage where we will be so technologically interconnected, and so economically interdependent, that we will create the conditions for the birth of a new kind of civilisation, a global civilisation. Over the course of the 21st century (the glacial pace of civilisation building) we will create a world where human beings, regardless of where they grow up and live, will essentially experience a life that has more in common with everyone on the planet than with some cultural subset rooted in a geographic area. Blame the Net, or praise it - as I do. It will be a good thing. But then, I'm an optimist, a believer in the really Long Boom.

**Peter Leyden** is founder of the Global Business Network and co-author of "The Long Boom".

**Xleyden AT gbn.orgX**

[[www.gbn.org](http://www.gbn.org)] "The Long Boom": [[www.wired.com/wired/5.07/longboom.html](http://www.wired.com/wired/5.07/longboom.html)]

### **Konrad Becker & Marie Ringler**

"What does the Net mean for politics?"

It could mean getting into trouble for speaking up against censorship on the Net...

Public Netbase t0 is a non-profit Internet service provider. Along with being an internationally acclaimed content developer, the organisation also runs a comprehensive event and information program in the Viennese Museumsquartier.

On July 7th this year Public Netbase was wrongly accused of distributing pornography on the Net by Mr. Haider, leader of the right-wing Austrian Freedom Party (FPO). The grounds for these unfounded allegations were a series of public events organised by Public Netbase in May 1998 entitled "sex.net - Sex, Lies & the Internet" [[www.t0.or.at/event/sex-index.html](http://www.t0.or.at/event/sex-index.html)]. The programme critically examined the issues of pornography, censorship and the Internet from a feminist perspective. As evidence, the FPO presented print-outs from a commercial website with the address [[www.sex.net](http://www.sex.net)]. Because of the similarity of the site's name to Public Netbase's programme, the FPO concluded that Public Netbase was the publisher of this site.

At a press conference on 14th July, Public Netbase dismissed the accusations and announced that it would be taking legal action against Mr. Haider. Within an hour Mr. Haider staged a press conference and released a press bulletin in which the earlier attacks on Netbase were aggressively repeated and then threatened to refer the issue to the Federal Chancellery. Next, Mr. Haider announced the beginning of a campaign against this and child pornography and his intention to make a publication of 'Degenerate Art' (i.e. artworks funded by public bodies which feature sexual and/or pornographic acts).

The Freedom Party started to attack authors and playwrights in the early 90s and has been stepping up its hostility towards the arts and cultural scene ever since. Only two years ago a dozen well established 'decadent' artists were singled out on larger than life billboards and branded for allegedly being in line with the Social Democrats (SPO).

**Konrad Becker & Marie Ringler** manage Public Netbase.

**Xkonrad AT t0.or.atX**

**Xmarie AT t0.or.atX**

### **Saskia Sassen**

Today the Internet is no longer what it was in the 1970s or 1980s; it has become a contested space with considerable possibilities for segmentation and privatisation. We cannot take its democratic potential as a given simply because of its interconnectivity. And we cannot take its 'seamlessness' as a given simply because of its technical properties. This is a particular moment in the history of digital networks, one when powerful corporate actors and high performance networks are strengthening the role of private digital space and altering the structure of public digital space. Digital space has emerged not simply as a means for communicating, but as a major new theatre for capital accumulation and transference. But civil society is also an increasingly energetic presence in cyberspace. The greater the diversity of cultures and groups, the better for this larger political and civic inhabitation of the Internet, and the more effective the resistance to the risk that the corporate world might set the standards. The Internet has emerged as a powerful medium for non-elites to communicate, support each other's struggles and create the equivalent of insider groups on levels ranging from the local to the global. We are seeing the formation of a whole new world of transnational political and civic projects.

**Saskia Sassen** is a professor at The University of Chicago. Her latest book is *Globalisation and Its Discontents*, New York: New Press, 1998

**Xsassen AT columbia.eduX**

### **Scott Aiken**

Inevitably, people will get riled up in a lot of places, and when they do they'll use the Net to knit together highly distributed media systems to get their way. The power of these will cause all kinds of havoc, like town gossip in little villages scaled up to the whole world. This will keep politicians and media on their toes.

**Dr. G.S. Aikens**

Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Cambridge University

**Xgsa1001 AT cus.cam.ac.ukX**

### **Tony Blair in Absentia**

I passionately believe in the equal worth of every individual. I hate the squalor and idleness that shame our rich societies. I am committed to breaking down barriers of class and sex and race. I want to curb unaccountable power. I want more people to get on. And I am certain that we will only help more people get on if we create a strong and just society, designed to empower the many and not the few.

These are old values. But they need to be realised in new circumstances.

[...]

In a global economy, 1 trillion dollars a day is traded on international currency markets. The world's multinationals have budgets bigger than most governments. Exchange controls and capital controls have been abolished. So we need to rethink the role of macro-economic policy.

Changes in computing and communications technology are transforming our culture and society. 40 per cent of families with children have access to up-to-date PCs. Ten years ago we had three TV channels; soon we will have 200. We can produce more than ever before, with less labour than ever before.

[...]

The ideological changes [of New Labour] have been significant too. We recognise the global economy. We know the state can become a vested interest. We want to see successful, profit-making companies. We want to decentralise power. We have taken seriously the challenge of environmental concerns.

Taken from a speech given by Tony Blair at the Nexus/Guardian conference, 1/3/97

[[www.netnexus.org](http://www.netnexus.org)]

### **Ziauddin Sardar**

The taming of cyberspace is following the well-established colonial patterns of the conquest of the non-Western societies and cultures by the imperial West. Colonialism involved much more than physical occupation of the non-West; it was equally concerned with cultural and mental possession of non-Western people and representation of all things non-Western as innately inferior. The net is taking the colonial project to its next dimension. Like colonialism, it is rapidly becoming an instrument for creating new markets for Western consumer and cultural products in the non-West; for Western control and management of the non-West; and for marginalising non-Western cultures and world views by propagating and imposing Western ideologies and cultures on the non-West. The non-Western response to the new imperialism of the Net will be similar to its response to colonialism: resistance by all necessary means. Thus, from the Asian and African viewpoints, the politics of the Net is essentially the politics of resistance. And the net itself will become an instrument of this resistance. It will be used both to create a new non-Western cyberculture of resistance as well as subverted to undermine the domination and control of the West. We are thus heading towards covert and open cyberwars.

**Ziauddin Sardar** is editor of Futures, the monthly journal of forecasting, planning and policy.

**XZSardar AT compuserve.comX**

### **Dave Carter**

If we accept that a key aim of politics is empowering people to take more control over their own lives, then the role of the Net must be to provide new and imaginative tools to aid that process. Here in Manchester we believe that local government, together with the voluntary sector and the wider labour movement, has a crucial role to play in facilitating this. There is a lot of hype about the idea of 'electronic town halls' - we believe that electronic democracy has to be built from the bottom up. We are concentrating on supporting local initiatives, such as the Electronic Village Halls, which provide training and facilities to support people's access to the Net; the Labour Telematics Centre, which brings together the Workers' Educational Association and trade unions to ensure that the organisational abilities of workers, both current and future, are strengthened through innovative uses

of the Net; the Manchester Community Information Network, which is helping to develop on-line community networks at a local level.

The creation of the virtual Town Hall may still be some way off, but if it builds on the strengths of these local initiatives then it can provide an exciting way of reinvigorating local democracy at all levels.

**Dave Carter**, Manchester City Council.  
**Xdave.carter AT manchester.gov.ukX**

### **Diana McCarty**

Faces is a closed mailing list for women in media art. It was established in early '97 to provide a space where women could get information about one another, as well as information which we didn't get through the established channels of media art. And it is really working! There is a community being built up; women are developing projects and friendships over the list. The most amazing thing is to see what a difference it makes at media arts events. There are all these groups of totally different women who already have a sense of knowing each other, and they are talking. This might not sound like much, but it does make a difference. Compared to their obscurity within new media culture a few years ago, women are really gaining a presence. The list is still fairly small, just about 160 subscribers, but there is an amazing amount of diversity within that number.

**Diana McCarty** and Kathy Rae Huffman are the listowners of Faces which they co-moderate and of which the list-administrator is Valentina Djordevic. Subscribe by mailing them at **Xkathy AT vgtv.comX**, **Xdiana AT mrf.huX** or **Xvalid AT sero.orgX**. Faces is hosted by the Cybergrlls Webstation

### **Korinna Patelis**

What does the Net mean for politics in Western Europe? It means the perfect tech-nological determinist alibi for the revival of a series of bankrupt, clichéd versions of neo-liberalism: freedom of speech hysteria, an unfounded faith in individual sovereignty, the market, globalisation, free-trade. It also means the exploitation of the digital moment by market determinists who naturalise the market by presenting the Net and the market as strikingly similar; as two essentially dynamic, fast and uncontrollable bodies which should be left untampered with to function properly. Presenting the market as fair legitimises private property as the mechanism for the allocation of resources on-line. It produces an unproblematised disenchant-ment with existing politics (or any mediation) which comes to life only to give way to a rather naive credo - a direct democracy-based libertarian version of what the world should be like.

The simplicity of the political hype leads to a further reduction of politics to crude political dichotomies: state/market, socialism/capitalism, E.U. pro-tectionism/W.T.O. liberalisation, culture/commerce, totalitarian-ism/freedom, "Eastern" auth-oritarian governments/the U.S.

Old clichés, new populist clothes!

**Korinna Patelis**  
**Xcop02kp AT gold.ac.ukX**

### **Ross Anderson**

For me the significance is that I can do scientific work in collaboration with people in Austria, Norway or Oregon almost as easily as with people down the corridor. I have co-authored papers with people I haven't even met. So the value to me is clear; the value to the general public is less so.

**Ross Anderson** is head of the Cambridge Computer Lab and chair of the Foundation for Information Policy Research  
**Xrja14 AT cam.ac.ukX**

**X t;-b interviewed by h: k**  
Tony Benn & Hari Kunzru

If you listen to the New Labour version of history, than Tony Benn is a dinosaur. Unrepentantly socialist, a believer in a planned economy, he is also a politician in the old style, a debater, a public speaker, scornful of soundbite politics and slick presentation. All this indeed sets him at odds with current political culture. Cool Britannia politics is strangely silent about unionism, the rights of the individual, the defence of the weak against the strong.

But Benn is unconcerned about fashion. He knows he will have the last laugh on the Paul Smith-clad spin doctors who dismiss him as a relic. Why? Because the wily 73 year old politician who

So how do other politicians react when Benn starts videoing their meetings? "Ten years ago people would say put away your camera, and five years ago switch off that tape recorder but now people are so used to it that nobody ever minds at all." Eddie George, Governor of the Bank of England, was a recent victim, and apparently entirely relaxed about being filmed by this arch anti-capitalist. I say I find this willingness surprising, in a time when 'plausible deniability' has become the order of the day, and Benn gives another indicator of why he is so refreshingly out of step with the times. "Oh, I've never believed in being on or off the record. I think if you're elected you're on the record. I'm in favour of saying the same thing to everybody, privately or publicly." When did you last hear a British politician say that?

Benn is also a great advocate of the democratising possibilities of new technologies. In a media age, cheap near-broadcast-quality video equipment is a powerful political tool when put into the hands of the people. As is the internet. "Take the Liverpool dockers," he explains, gesturing with the trademark pipe so that it sprays strands of smouldering tobacco across his study. "They were on strike for over two years, and they went onto the internet. When I went up to visit there were American dockers, Canadian dockers. A Swiss journalist I know heard about the strike from trade unionists in Bombay. They got money and support from all over the world. There is no question about it. Politically, the internet is enormously important."

Many politicians, on left and right, would say as much. Whether your cause is trade unionism or supporting fox hunting, the net is a powerful tool for activism. But Benn is one of the few politicians prepared to defend the real public against the tabloid vision of public concerns. As Blair and Hague scramble to condemn paedophiles, Mary Bell, the commercialisation of Diana's memory and anything else they think will score high on the clap-o-meter, Benn is more concerned with the public's right to express itself, instead of having politicians do it for them. "I think the establishment are very very frightened of grassroots communication. All the talk about drugs and pornography on the internet is really government frightened of people using it for that purpose."

In common with many of the net's most ardent advocates, Benn believes many-to-many media may provide a credible alternative to our increasingly debased mass media culture. "The number of websites, the daily communication that goes on is on a huge scale. And I think that will undercut the Murdochs and the CNNs in time. At the moment it goes through to opinion formers, but in time it will spread through the local networks."

This confidence will not be shared by everybody. But Benn seems sure that the march of history will work in favour of technological democratisation. He constantly places the current technology boom in broader historical context, the tell-tale habit of an old-school Marxist. For Benn, the Tolpuddle martyrs, the CND campaigns of the fifties, even Henry the Eighth, are all useful in understanding the questions we face now. "Control of communications is the key," he says, explaining the Henry connection. "He nationalised the church because he wanted a priest in every pulpit saying God wanted you to do what the King wanted you to do. Charles II nationalised the Post Office in 1660 so he could open everyone's letters. The Tories nationalised the BBC in 1922 because they wanted a pundit on every channel saying there was no alternative to what the government wanted you to do. If you can break through that control and communicate directly, you are really destabilising the power structure."

Benn links freedom of speech on the net with the old issue of press freedom, and sees public access to encryption and a culture of anti-censorship as central to democracy. One wonders whether this is a definition of democracy which would be popular in Number Ten. When I mention that it is difficult to raise public awareness about the political issues raised by new technologies, Benn looks at me as if I have just complained because daddy won't buy me a new mountain bike. "It's like everything else," he tells me sternly "You have to campaign for it. How did men get the vote? They campaigned. How did women get the vote? They chained themselves to the railings and went to prison. How did apartheid end? It wasn't because they had a spin doctor but because the Africans wouldn't accept exclusion from the democratic process. Life is a struggle between the rich and the poor, the government and the people, and it's always going to be like that."

So I ought to get up off my arse, then? Yes, Benn thinks this would be a good idea, not least because the stakes are getting higher all the time. The struggle between rich and poor is "intensifying, because of the amount of technical power at our disposal. If I kill you with a knife that's one murder. If I have an atom bomb I can kill ninety-thousand people. The moral issue is the same. Information rich and information poor are a new classification of rich and poor, because some people have access to surveillance, information gathering, research workers and equipment, and other people have nothing. If you keep people ignorant they're more likely to do what they're told."

Listening to Benn's fiery rhetoric, one can't help but feel uncomfortably aware of the vacuity and bland opportunism that passes for politics in Britain in 1998. Whether or not one agrees with his economic prescriptions, the Grand Old Man of the Left is full of salutary reminders of what we stand to lose if we become lazy about democracy. He is also far more in touch with technology issues than the smiling soundbiters who sell 'a laptop for every schoolchild' or 'a safe internet' as the prescription for all technological ills. "I think that trying to retain self-confidence in the face of a rising tide of technology that gives power to somebody but not necessarily to you, is a very interesting political question." Indeed. Perhaps it is the key question of our times. And the answer? For Tony Benn it is, predictably, an old one. "Organise! Do it yourself! Democracy is not what somebody does to you when you vote for them every five years, it's what you do where you live and work - and that's why it's so frightening to the people in power."

#### **XIV The Nineteenth Century and the future of technocultures in India**

by Ravi Sundaram

the 19th century and the future of india

On May 11, 1998, a series of nuclear tests banished the 21st century from India and reinstated the visions of 19th century modernity with full force. In a sense the 19th century has always been there, but in the realm of high techno-culture in India, a moment of (silicon-driven) rupture was being posited over the past few years, confidently and not without a certain arrogance. This is somewhat

ironic, since the idea of rupture was in itself a supremely 19th century concept, albeit shot through with a Jacobin imaginary.

On May 11, 1998, the Indian government, now controlled by the far-right Hindu nationalists, announced that it had carried out a series of nuclear explosions in the desert state of Rajasthan. The announcement was bland and technical, yet the effects were immediate. Every faction of the political class rallied around the government ('how can we criticise the achievements of Indian science?' as a communist leader put it...), and the middle classes were jubilant. The techno-nationalist moment had arrived. Indian scientists had shown the world. And what could be more politically correct than the fact that the head of the scientists team which carried out the blasts was a Muslim, who was well versed in Hindu scriptures...?

What is crucial about these blasts is that they brought techno-politics suddenly and brutally into the public sphere. The blasts have also ensured a certain re-arrangement of technological time and modernity in South Asia. In the first place, the matching blasts by Pakistan have completed the process begun by India and put both countries in a state of nuclear terror. Despite the consistent nuclear hypocrisy of the metropolitan powers on proliferation (the argument being that Third World countries are less 'responsible' than the West with nuclear weapons), the sub-continent is faced with the real possibility of mutual annihilation. Also for the first time in the sub-continent, there is now a small but vigorous peace movement, which contains many dissident scientists from the state-sponsored research institutes.

What is particularly interesting is the acceleration of 19th century technological discourses after the nuclear blasts. Nuclear politics, as instruments of technological terror used by national states, is a typical 19th century practice. I refer to the '19th century' here not in terms of formal time but as an imaginative embodiment of a particular form of modernity. In this sense the 19th century could be said to have 'begun' in 1789 and 'ended' in 1989. What is crucial about this form of modernity is the magnification of the national sovereign state as a site of power and violence and the use of older forms of communicative speed - telegraph, railway, the automobile. The 19th century also privileged a form of 'public' politics - hence 1848, 1917, 1968, 1989.

Net culture in the west, by and large, has generally been quite contemptuous of 19th century politics, in fact of most public politics in general. This is particularly true of the US net scene, which is almost self-contained in its imagination. Given that 'Europe' has little or no cultural presence in the electronic geographies of the Third World, India included, it is the US example that is particularly attractive to the emerging techno-elites.

the 19th century and the future of india In India these elites are clustered around the large software industry, and technocratic sections of the state. Here, the US discourses on techno-culture, with their anti-statism and libertarian rhetoric, hold a particular appeal to the new techno-elites. By the 1990s elite discourses on technology would typically rail against the now troubled state institutions and bureaucracy and call for a new economic model in alliance with metropolitan capital. Borrowing from the futuristic rhetoric of the Western elite, this group had been trying, often unsuccessfully, to make its agenda public.

I have argued elsewhere that this transition was part of a general crisis of Indian nationalism and a transition to a new, still amorphous urban culture. At the same time the upper-caste elite's investment in the city itself has been ambivalent, favouring as it does the safety of a new suburbia and the emerging 'techno-cities' in Bangalore and Hydrebad.

Many years ago, Herbert Marcuse offered a radical re-reading of the Prometheus myth. The culture of modernity, said Marcuse, has been typically Promethean, with its investment in progress and accelerated development. Prometheus's theft of fire from the gods now became a call to subjugate nature, thus suppressing the more radical Dionysian elements in the modern. In the case of post-Independence India, Promethean modernity took the shape of the ideology of development.

Here, a technocratic elite of modernisers would organise society towards the future. 'Society' was seen as a tabula rasa to be remapped with a scientific nationalist vision. Large scientific institutes were set up with state support; technical universities (the Indian Institutes of Technology) were established with US help. This technological space was of course typically 19th century in its self-imagination. It was composed of a westernised, upper-caste elite; the vast scientific institutions were governed by a formal bureaucratic rationality and closely linked to power.

Technological space was also monumental - not unlike the Soviet experience. The monument (Nehru called them 'temples of modernity') could be a steel mill, a dam or a power plant. Along with the technological monument came 'the Secret'. The Secret was the idea that technological knowledge was the monopoly of the national state; all transgressions would be severely punished. The idea of the Secret was once again a 19th century concept. As such the state's monopoly over Secrecy was backed up less by simple terror - as under Stalinism - than through a vast corpus of laws, mostly inherited from British colonialism.

The dream of Prometheus failed. By the 1970s the ideology of development was compromised by severe economic crisis and the rise of social movements. Since the beginning of the 1980s there has been a slow transition from the old regime of national development towards the loosening of controls vis-a-vis transnational capital. Techno-Politics also changed. From a state monopoly of technological knowledge there has been a secular movement towards the private sector in terms of visible production of certain technological goods. The key commodity here has been the rise of the software industry.

The cultural politics of software in a Third World country like India pose interesting problems. Let us look at facts. Software growth has been phenomenal, with exports running into many billions of dollars and projected to grow even further. But the vast majority of the software industry is geared towards exports, fulfilling turnkey needs of transnational capital. Only a small fraction of it is actually sold in India, and there is very little software in the local languages. In terms of a global commodity chain, software plays the role that Third World textiles used to play a few years ago, occupying the lower end of a commodity chain that begins in the West.

the 19th century and the future of india

But imaginatively software represents a certain form of knowledge creation, which particularly endears it to the upper-caste elites. It is a form of knowledge which, along with the Net, allows the elite to emancipate itself from the everyday (now seen to be contaminated by the politics of uncertainty), and the limits of territory.

Here lies the problem of counter-cultural techno-politics in India. There is simply no counter-culture which parallels those of European and US net-space, and there probably will not be for a long time. In fact, in India itself net culture remains an elite preserve and part of an urban consumption regime hegemonised by the far right.

Since the rise of an urban consumption culture in the 1980s, it has been the Hindu nationalist right that has been the most active in India's towns, pushing a technologically savvy political culture that has spoken to the new tastes of middle class urban life. The Hindu right pioneered the use of audio cassettes in the 1980s to spread hate speeches, they also used large screen TV projections to show propaganda films that called for campaigns against the Muslim minority. It was the right which opened

one of India's first websites, and which today operates a large number of them for the Indian diaspora. The Hindu right combined a peculiar mixture of a 19th century state authoritarianism with a remapped techno-politics drawn from post-sovereign cultures. In a sense this is 'hybridity' Indian style, a dangerous mixture of techno-cultural innovation and authoritarian politics. It is precisely this combination that endears the right to the vast majority of the technical community, as well as to young upper-caste programmers.

In fact, the government commission's recent release of a blueprint for information technology is revealing. The commission consisted of various elite technocrats committed to a futuristic ideology in alliance with transnational capital. What the document does is remarkable in ideological terms, for it blends futurism with the Hindu right's nationalist goals. The sections of the technological elite that had complained about state dominance in technology are now firmly part of the Hindu right's project. The 21st century imagination of the futurists blends seamlessly with the politics of a state committed to the 19th century politics of nuclear terror. It is a resolution of multiple times that philosophers would have marvelled at.

To be sure, this picture does not exhaust the entire gamut of newly emerging urban cultures in India today. There is a different 'Indian' techno-culture which is, again, a typical mixture of older forms of mechanical reproduction and new innovations. Thus there is a vast music market (based on inexpensive audio cassettes) which operates through a mixture of legality and piracy. The music scene is one which lives off the culture of popular cinema, with a radical mixing of music styles and electronic innovation quite unlike those of the past. A lot of this new space has yet to become part of elite net culture in India itself, although it has a lively presence in the diaspora. But the BBSs in India (which to this day remain illegal) have a vast invisible presence in urban culture and provide a space to those who cannot afford the net. BBS culture remains varied and dynamic, with a deeper investment in what the writer Michel de Certeau has called the 'millennial ruses' of the popular and the everyday.

The landscape of modernity in India is therefore a mixture of the 19th century's techno-politics of death and nuclear terror, an urban consumption regime deeply implicated in right-wing politics, as well as 'post-nationalist' techno-discourses like the software culture and elite net culture. At the margins, yet not entirely immune to the above scenario, is the new music scene and the illegal BBS culture. Fluidity and continuity, chaos and homogeneity, violence and pleasure are all part of this landscape.

Here the problem of compatibility with Western net cultures, even those outside the mainstream, can be posed. In the West there is a large and varied net community, with its own subcultures and practices. I cannot see a similar situation emerging in India (or anywhere else in the Third World) for some time to come. The dialogue on techno-cultures between the 'West' and the Third World has of course not even begun, in contrast to the relatively varied debates on post-colonial imaginaries in literature and popular media like cinema. In the case of techno-culture the problems are deeper. the 19th century and the future of india

It seems to me that simple appeals to greater access in the Third World evade the crucial issue. The old multicultural model, crafted to integrate racial and sexual minorities in the West, cannot be applied here. Part of the problem is also the narrow basis of the avant-garde in the Net which has a post-1968 aversion to public politics. Some of the soi-disant avant-garde practices in the Net are grounded in a bizarre self-referentiality, which is quite puzzling to a critical Third World observer.

A new politics/practice of translation between the West and the electronic periphery is both necessary and possible. At a basic level an appreciation of the complex nature of techno-cultures in the Third World is needed. In India, the greatest investment in electronic modernity has in fact come from the

Hindu right, which has combined this with an authoritarian and dangerous nuclear politics. In the realm of popular techno-cultures, a rich and often pirate music culture has grown on the frontiers of the film industry. Here, too, the models of 'hybridity' and 'multiculturalism' that have emerged out of western debates make little sense.

**Ravi Sundaram** is a Fellow of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, India.  
**Xrsundar AT del2.vsnl.net.inX**

## **XX Pancapitalism and Panaceas: Manuel Castells in London**

by Martin Harris

pancapitalism

Manuel Castells, widely acknowledged to be the world's foremost authority on the emergent 'network society', made a series of high profile appearances in London this summer to launch the 21st century Era think tank. Castells argues that global capitalism, dominated by information networks and knowledge intensive services, has emerged as the most productive system the world has ever known. It has also produced steep rises in inequality, crime and exclusion. Megacities like New York, Mexico City or Jakarta are connected to global networks in ways which disconnect the local poor from the sources of wealth. Whole countries and regions may fall into what Castells calls 'informational black holes'. Those who cannot learn the information-based skills will also be excluded. The lesson for Britain and Europe is that economic survival will depend on finding new and more flexible ways of using technology within the new world order.

But should information technology really be seen as the 'last, best chance' for the industrialised world? And how far should we buy into an image of societies dominated by networks? Getting serious answers to these questions is made more difficult by the political context in which Castells is speaking and in which his work is being read here in Britain. Politicians and policy makers need quick solutions to the problem of creating jobs, particularly in those regions which have become increasingly marginalised in the digital age. They tend to view information technology as an unconditional good, and as a panacea for most species of postindustrial blight. The new networked organisations are confidently expected to create knowledge intensive jobs, devolving power and eliminating bureaucracy. The problem here is that Castells himself has shown that there is no simple relation between information technology and job growth in service economies, which are now increasingly polarised between low end and high end occupations. The US Bureau of Labour Statistics forecasts a rise of 368,000 systems analysts and computer scientists in the years up to 2005. US statistics also show jobs being created in various other professional services, but this has to be balanced against the rises in low skill, low status jobs like retail sales (up 887,000), drivers (up 617,000), cleaners, (up 555,000), food counter staff (up 552,000) and waiters (up 449,000).

Corporations like Microsoft have grown spectacularly, but the tendency, even in high tech sectors, has been for large corporations to go for growth through merger and acquisition. These are often justified as guarantees of funding for research and development. But mergers also allow markets to be dominated by a smaller number of corporate players who have created global economies of scale - hence the phenomenon of 'jobless growth'. Under these conditions, the real issue is not knowledge but control, and we should view with scepticism the claim that information networks will lead to a more liberated future of work, or a fundamental departure from the existing ways of industrial capitalism. Downsizing and job insecurity have received substantial media coverage - the enhanced forms of employee control imposed on those who remain in the reengineered corporation of the 1990s has been less well reported. The problem for the network society thesis is that this 'control revolution', (much of it supported by I.T.) is happening in many of the knowledge based sectors (such as banking,

finance, or pharmaceuticals), where new and more devolved forms of organisation are supposed to emerge. It is responsibility, rather than power, which has been devolved in the corporation of the 1990s.

New forms of interactivity may nevertheless have the long term potential to change the forms of community, contract and association that have been with us for centuries. Here, a careful reading of Castells reveals a much more politicised view of the network society than was suggested by his broad brush statements about IT and job creation. The distinction between work and home is breaking down - and people may enjoy managing time and space more flexibly. However, in a competitive work culture career advancement and promotion are closely related to personal visibility at the office. Working remotely carries the risk of isolation, particularly for women who tend to adopt a greater burden of housework when they work from home. One of the paradoxes of virtual working is that it is those who are already well established in conventional jobs and professional networks who may be best placed to benefit from reduced commuting times and flexible working hours.

Information networks do change the organisation of work - but it has long been recognised that technological change at work is an inherently messy 'negotiated' process which has little to do with the smooth functioning of networks themselves. The key issue is not, in fact, 'information' but rather the choices which surround new forms of contract and control. The underlying point is that 'technology' needs to be understood not as a thing 'out there' but as a social process which is inseparable from political choices and interests.

The network metaphor derives from the idea that the nation state is being left behind by the transglobal flow of information. But the state has hardly been absent from the technological developments which are having such a profound effect on society. Castells himself has questioned the more naive claims of the globalisation thesis, and he recognises that the state was a key player in the technological advances made in the 1980s. This is apparent in the industrial success stories of Japan and Korea, and in the development of the Internet itself. Castells is optimistic about the future of the Internet - but once again a close reading of his work produces a more political view of the interactive society than was suggested by what transpired at his public lectures.

Castells has argued that "every cultural expression, from the worst to the best, from the most elitist to the most popular, will be represented in the new digital universe". At present the multimedia industries are dominated by business interests whose prime concern is with entertainments like video on demand, digital theme parks and interactive games. As with other forms of digitised capitalism, industrial scale is paramount, particularly in distribution. Entertainment is the fastest growing of all US sectors, with a turnover of \$350 BN per annum. Castells predicts that the information society will divide, in the short term, into two essentially distinct populations - the 'interacting', who will enjoy the benefits of genuinely new forms of communication, and the 'interacted' who will be provided with a much more restricted diet of prepackaged choices. But there is nothing inevitable about any of this. One survey showed that 35% of TV viewers were willing to pay for distance learning on the Net, while only 19% were willing to pay for video on demand. Interactive networks could support new forms of public space, shaped by a wide range of stakeholders and not just by corporate players fixated by consumer 'choice'. The starting points for the debate should be the values and contested meanings which are represented in cyberspace. EC policy makers do, of course, have a large political stake in encouraging the multimedia industries to create jobs, but this is not in itself incompatible with Castells's thinking on electronic public spaces.

Manuel Castells has mapped out the transformations in work and culture which are redefining the shape of industrial society. Corporations and politicians, recognising the extent of this transformation, realise that they have something to learn from his investigations. The danger for the rest of us is that the more challenging parts of his message may be lost in the clamour for immediate solutions to the

economic and social problems thrown up by information capitalism.

**Martin Harris**

**Xmartin.harris AT brunel.ac.ukX**

### **XXIII Eyes, ears, mouths and media: Cyberns cross the borders of internal exile**

by Branka Davic

In 1991 war started in the territory of Ex-Yugoslavia. Yugoslav society went into isolation. This process was slow, but it still appears definitive. Since May 1992 Yugoslavia, or ex-Yugoslavia, or Serbia and Monte Negro, or whatever people call this country nowadays, was officially excluded from the international community. This meant that all legal and financial transactions were prohibited and that no goods could be exported or imported without approval from the international community. Travel was also prohibited in very sophisticated ways: a visa is required for almost all countries in the world, except three neighbouring ones - Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. For the rest of the world, the process of getting a visa is really painful. For those who aren't aware of the situation which preceded this one, the fact that Yugoslav citizens were once able to travel without a visa to almost any country in the world might explain their current feelings of isolation better. And yet, life continues, also for those who disagree with war and destruction. But what has happened to them?

The first big demonstrations took place in March 1991. More than one hundred thousand people took to the streets of Belgrade. The demonstrations ended with tanks, the police force and the army occupying the streets - a complete blockade of Belgrade. Lots of people were beaten, arrested and humiliated but one couldn't hear anything about it on the television news whereas 'official' (propaganda) reports spoke about hooligans attacking the police. This was when I first heard about young people distributing reports about what was happening in Belgrade during the demonstrations; it was when I first heard about people reporting what they saw just by chatting and leafleting. Unfortunately, the net of people doing this was small, and many of them still had no idea about computers or computer networks. But it created a picture of possible ways of communicating.

The stark choice faced by those who were opposed to the 'official' version of politics was of real or inner - geographical or psychological - emigration. But what does this mean exactly? It means that since 1991 several hundreds of thousands of educated people in their early twenties to late forties left the country, alone or with their families. I was among them. For different reasons, those who stayed or later returned went for inner emigration. Inner emigration means self-isolation from official politics, from the official cultural scene, possibly even from the public in general. It means self-isolation in aid of a protection of self-integrity and mental health.

The cultural scene, on the other hand, was 'occupied' by turbo-folk stars and their promoters in the official media. Another thing one could see everywhere was TV 'prophets' predicting a bright and happy future, economic prosperity - in a word: eternal happiness waiting just around the corner. Plus, of course, the endless political debates and war reports which featured in numerous, hourly TV special news-bulletins.

Almost the entire culture scene of the 1980s disappeared from view. Artists and cultural workers were working silently, almost illegally, exhibiting in private flats, looking for alternative ways to express what they thought and felt. Only very few were organising exhibitions, screenings or seminars. One of these was Cinema Rex in Belgrade, as well as a circle of rebellious journalists and critics connected with Radio B-92. Such a circle existed in almost every town or city, but the rest of the country knew hardly anything about what was going on no more than 100 km away. Lack of magazines, newspapers and radio stations which would cover and discuss events was a bad thing, but even worse was the lack of information distribution in general. By far the best way to announce something was through

rumours, by the spoken word, like in ancient times.

In 1996, my family bought its first computer. It was a first step. We bought a second hand modem almost at the same time, which gave us the opportunity to be connected with the university net. At the beginning, I found that only very few of my friends were connected too. The university net only had a small capacity; each time you did succeed in getting through access was limited to twenty minutes. But it was something. The number of users rose rapidly in 1997. That was the year that the first commercial provider opened its offices in Novi Sad. The connection got better, but it was also more expensive, as was the equipment. Feeling constantly isolated I came upon the idea of organising a small mailing list in the Serbian language which could help to spread information. I started with eighteen subscribers in May 1997, running it from my personal account without any special server or mailing list software. It still runs that way. Now, the cyberns mailing list has over sixty subscribers in seven countries. It is small but sometimes very useful. Especially because of the fruitful cooperation with the Syndicate mailing list.

Somehow that was not enough though, and the feeling that something else had to be done was constantly present. A few months later, after many conversations with people from different fields, a group of people started to think about a cyberns media lab initiative. The name was very pretentious, because we had no physical space or donations of any kind, but we had our own private equipment and a lot of ideas. Right now the cyberns media lab initiative (because it still is more of an initiative than a 'real' lab) directly involves ten of us (performers, video artists, painters, architects and programmers). We realised immediately that we didn't have enough money to think about big events. But small things can always be done. The first thing we started with was a lecture by Geert Lovink at an alternative space called Fabrika, which we organised in May 1997. Two weeks later, we hosted a visit from Stephen Kovacs, the director of OSTranenie, who gave a lecture at the Art Academy. During that year, our members also participated in the Beauty and the East conference in Ljubljana, the DokumentaX Hybrid Workspace/Deep Europe group in Kassel and Crossing Over in Sofia and OSTranenie '97 in Dessau.

1998 has been marked by more activities. Cyberns media members helped make many projects possible, including performances by the group BAZA, Larisa Blazic's web pages and video screenings of Aleksandar Davic's works. They participated in, and/or organised many different workshops such as the Crossing Over Video Workshop in Novi Sad (July 1-15). This August three cyberns media lab members will present their latest production based on communication, in Manchester, during Revolting. Aleksandar will present a selection of Yugoslav video production and a video about Crossing Over will be presented by the project director. Until the end of the year we hope to succeed finishing work on our first CD-Rom, Collective Memories.

That's how cyberns media lab works: supporting our members in their individual work, providing technical help and knowledge, organising events and lectures. We still do not have any work space or financial support. What we have is circle of friends and supporters in this country and abroad who are giving us feedback and confirming that we aren't working in vain. Big events require big money. But small things can always be done. Isn't that the truth?

CYBERNS MEDIA LAB is situated in Novi Sad, the second biggest city in Serbia, with about 400.000 citizens and its own university and football club.

**Branka Davic**  
**Xspiridon AT EUnet.yuX**