

Real World Is Less Rosy Than the Monitor's Glow

Commentary

By SABINE HRECHDAKIAN

The Whole Earth Review, an alternative magazine founded by Stewart Brand (and edited for a time by Kevin Kelly, the executive editor of *Wired*) published a self-scoring test a few years back on our "basic environmental perception of place." The test asked questions like: "How long is the growing season where you live?" "What species have become extinct in your area?" "Where does your garbage go?"

It would not be a leap to say that most could not answer even the most basic question: "From where you're reading this, point north."

So what, some might say. Who needs to know the seasons when we can eventually alter weather patterns or colonize Mars? Why should the extinction of a rare plant or insect be cause for alarm?

The consequences of our increasing retreat from the physical world into the disembodied communities of cyberspace are grave. As people become more dependent on machines and spend long hours at the computer, they interact less with the actual world around them.

This is increasingly true for children who no longer learn about their environment through direct contact, but via computers. Simulated reality with all its glitz and instant gratification can't compete with the messy, unpredictable, and in contrast, boring equivalent in nature.

Why sit in the woods for hours on end patiently waiting for some action when you can surf the Web or pop in a CD-ROM and see the intimate lives of animals so elusive in nature? Having such immediate access to information otherwise difficult to get is not a bad thing; it's the lack of context that disturbs me. If no one is bothering to spend anytime outside learning about plants, animals and ecosystems, then no one will mourn their loss.

It seems that if we are to develop a sense of responsibility and perspective about technology, we have to make some distinction between manufactured reality and nature.

The online world has now grown exponentially into a global community of over 107 million users. This delirious growth has spawned a dizzying array of proponents who devoutly believe in the

liberating powers of technology. In their view machines are not only artifacts of science and culture, but natural extensions of human creativity that herald the next stage of humanity's evolutionary development.

Those views may sound extreme, but in many of the pro-Internet magazines that have sprouted up in the past few years, much of the general conversation around subjects like bio-engineering, artificial ecologies, and virtual reality resounds with transcendentalist fantasies of breaking free from limits, especially those imposed by nature.

Of all the magazines that celebrate digital culture, *Wired* is perhaps the best-known and most influential. It has predicted many critical trends, anticipated the blurring of copy and advertising in print media, covered a wide range of fields, from science to politics to the arts, in prose that is consistently better than many large circulation magazines, all of which has helped it to become and remain a success.

Yet behind its futurist aesthetic and hip profiles of the digital vanguard is a disturbing ideology that co-opts the metaphors of biology and combines it with free market laissez-faire jargon to justify not only the revolutionary power of technology, but its evolutionary destiny. Kelly and the magazine proclaim, without a hint of irony, that technology is 100 percent positive, and that anyone who believes otherwise is a techno-phobe standing in the way of progress, or worse — a Luddite!

Most of us would agree that technological advances in science, medicine, and

engineering have improved the standard of living and quality of life for many people. The information revolution has transformed the economy and the way companies do business by enabling people to communicate across the globe instantaneously. The development of new technologies is doing away with the vestiges of industrial production and has increased productivity, brought prosperity and low unemployment to many. But there are always hidden costs to growth — social, economic and environmental — that the digital revolutionaries dismiss or blatantly ignore.

A sampling of recent stories in *Wired*'s pages illustrates the dangerous mix of historical amnesia and naive idealism that is so pervasive in Internet culture. An article in the July '97 issue titled "The Long Boom: A History of the Future 1980-2020" offers a typically optimistic revision of the last 20 years, and goes on to predict a bright future of unparalleled growth, global integration and prosperity. All this at virtually no social or environmental cost. The authors are quick to point out that they are not making predictions (that would mean being negative), but informed projections (don't worry, be happy!).

Nearly a year later the fifth anniversary issue continues its rosy forecast as an author writes, "The life of *Wired* coincides with the five best years that humanity has ever experienced." This view is corroborated in nearly every article in the issue along with the editorial, which states proudly:

"One other thing hasn't changed: *Wired*'s critical optimism. After a century of war, oppression, and ecological

degradation, we've entered a period of peace, increasing prosperity, an improving environment, and greater freedom for a growing proportion of the planet."

I am all for looking at the bright side, but the last time I read the paper, war, poverty and the destruction of the environment were still alive and kicking. Yes, the information economy is contributing to an economic boom in the U.S. and encouraging global democratic cooperation, but the gulf between the rich and poor is also growing wider, multi-nationals have a global reach and power that allows them to elude regulation and accountability, and the rise in population and consumption is destroying habitat and contributing to the sixth greatest extinction in the earth's history. The idea that digital technology has fundamentally altered 2000 years of the less salutary aspects of human history is more than naive; it's dangerous.

While technology helps to lift countries up into a higher level of economic wealth, it also widens the rift for those who are left behind. Success comes only to those industrialized nations that already have the wealth and resources to support the transition. The few manufacturing jobs left are exported to other countries leaving the poor with little prospect for a decent wage, while the new technocratic elite reap the benefits.

The Wordwatch Institute's recent annual survey of global trends found that "Around the world, more people are getting telephones and access to the Internet while at the same time an increasing number are without basic household sanitation . . ." It is easy to be fooled into thinking that because the economies of rich nations are doing well, that the whole world is benefiting, yet of the 102 million Internet users, 62 million of them are in the U.S., and 20 million in Europe.

Proponents argue that these inequities are temporary problems that will soon disappear when computer prices drop, and economic benefits trickle down to the less fortunate. They say that the digital revolution will create upheaval at first and encounter resistance just as the industrial and agricultural revolutions did before, but it does help put things into perspective to know that for many, getting a toilet, not a computer, would be the sign of a true revolution.

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