

DENYING HUMAN NATURE IN CYBERSPACE

BY

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Because I recently wrote a novel (*Internet Exodus* at [Amazon](#)), a key element of which is a *Declaration of Internet Dependence*, I reread John Perry Barlow's 1996 essay, *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*. With 20-years of distance and experience, this *cri de coeur* is obviously both timelessly universal and utterly locked in its time and place. Either way, it's an artifact to be admired. Even if it is anachronistic since cyberspace has clearly been revealed as indivisibly fundamental to everyone and everything.

For those unfamiliar with the document, Barlow—a lyricist for the Grateful Dead, among other things—gave the bird to “the man,” letting the establishment know in no uncertain terms that cyberspace was off limits. Writing from the future, representing all of “us” enlightened lovers of liberty, Barlow passionately painted a vision of cyberspace as a pristine place of mind that would not truck being polluted. Corrupt government and governance could not be tolerated. Unmediated and unregulated, mind-to-mind communicating would ensure cyberspace was and would remain a higher realm.

This is its timeless universality. Utopian visions are the stock in trade of prophets and con men. The promise of milk and honey has spurred Levites, Quakers, entrepreneurs and venture capitalists, revolutionaries, and all manner of apocalyptic sect. Whether it ever came to fruition or not, this promise of an undiscovered (cyber-)country to shape was

essential for progress. Few pick up and journey for more of the same in a place exactly like here and now. Thus was Barlow a beacon for the pioneers who would open the treasure and trade routes to cyberspace. Early adopters if you will.

Yet, with a Gerry Garcia riff rumbling through your mind's ear, it is impossible not to read in Barlow's words and phrasing the same impulsion as behind the changes of the 1960s. Civil rights, women's rights, and Vietnam-driven antiestablishment protests of the time started the same way. Communes are the most visceral 1960s reflection of Barlow's 1996 sentiments. "Peace man. We don't recognize your fascist authority..."

There is an unbroken, though perhaps thin line connecting the communes (even the one in which Steve Jobs spent time), protests, Dead Heads, Hippies turned Yuppies, the Internet, Barlow's Declaration, the dot-com bust, digital organizational efficiencies, Edward Snowden and Wikileaks, and cloud computing to where we are today.

Marx said history repeats itself: first as tragedy, second as farce. The first turn: that the Hippy nirvana was so quickly coaxed into cultural suicide by the Yuppies they evolved into could be considered tragic in some quarters. To be generous by using the Gulf of Tonkin escalation and Clinton's election as President as bookends for the period during which Hippy vision turned into Yuppie memory, this first inevitable defiling of a dream took the better part of 30 years. Less generously, using *Thirtysomething* and *The Big Chill* as the point of recognition of the end, the hallucination lasted less than 20 years.

The second iteration, with cyberspace as the cause and involving essentially the same people with essentially the same purpose and approach, may not be farce. That's for later examiners to determine. It certainly wasn't intended that way. Besides, it did rally a certain, influential pocket of Libertarian leaders to march energetically into the future. That these purists were joined and soon overwhelmed by others who saw dollars and actual liberty from the shackles of old governance structures (I'm referring to traders in online

gambling, pornography, and other contraband.), was inevitable. Barlow, from the future, neglected to account for these and how they fit into the evolved, ungoverned country of cyberspace. That the new Boomer establishment achieved the same outcome with 60% efficiency gain is also predictable. (On second thought, this part may, indeed, be farcical—or at least naïve.)

Not only have governments and the corporate establishment blithely ignored Barlow's demand to keep off "our" property, in those pockets of cyberspace where people do communicate mind-to-mind, it looks nothing like the high-minded future from where Barlow spoke. The future we have actually realized is a pointless and noisy cacophony of wasteful vapour. Sure, everyone is talking. But most of what's being said is not worth hearing. And that's before we descend into the realm of trolls, cyber-bullies, haters, and the world's largest red light district.

And this is how, 20 years on, Barlow's declaration of *Independence* turns into a declaration of *Dependence*: we acknowledge a binary reversal in our understanding and use of cyberspace. It's how the 1996 "Keep Out" message turns into, "Since you're here, we insist upon..." Like the US constitutional document from which we both hijacked the name, the later version acknowledges inevitabilities and realities. It is, in the American tradition, a pragmatic entreaty, not a wishful one. As such, my declaration of *Dependence* won't rally the adventurers. It can, however, serve a different, organizing and structuring purpose.

The revolution is over. As evolutions go, however: maybe, just maybe, inviting some governance is a good and necessary thing. Maybe we have become dependent on the Internet and it's now a right to be protected and preserved. Maybe Barlow willfully denied the power of our lesser angels just to get our better angels to do the truly hard

work of opening cyberspace. And it served its purpose... until our lesser angels tromped all over them and sent them packing for yet other undiscovered mountaintops.

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