

# A Treatise on Electronic Anarchy & the Net

Arguments for elimination of the information age

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“Every year of her life...the Net had been growing more expansive and seamless. Computers did it. Computers melted other machines, fusing them together. Television-telephone-telex. Tape recorder-VCR-laser disk. Broadcast tower linked to microwave dish linked to satellite. Phone line, cable TV, fiber-optic cords hissing out words and pictures in torrents of pure light. All netted together in a web over the world, a global nervous system, an octopus of data. There’d been plenty of hype about it. It was easy to make it sound transcendently incredible.

“...The Net was a lot like television, another former wonder of the age. The Net was a vast glass mirror. It reflected what it was shown. Mostly human banality.”

—Bruce Sterling, *Islands In The Net*

how far back

are we willing to go? that seems to be  
the question. the more we give up  
the more we will be blessed, the more  
we give up, the further back we go, can we  
make it under the sky again, in moving tribes  
that settle, build, move on and build again  
owning only what we carry, do we need  
the village, division of labor, a friendly potlatch  
a couple of times a year, or must it be  
merely a ‘cybernetic civilization’  
which may or may not save the water, but will not  
show us our root, or our original face, return  
us to the source, how far  
(forward is back) are we willing to go after all?

—Diane DiPrima, *Revolutionary Letter #33*

Electronic mail (e-mail) is a medium for sending messages from your personal computer or work terminal to other people with networked computers. In a matter of seconds, messages are relayed to other users whether they be across the street or across the planet.

“The net” began two decades ago as the technological brain-child of the Department of Defense. It was refined by the corporate elite, and emerges today as the celebrated tool of more than 20 million users whether they are bored workers sending missives from their sanitized cubicles or radical activists planning the next gathering or demo.

Many people utilize e-mail for free, through accounts at universities or corporations, while others pay a small fee to commercial providers such as CompuServe or America Online. Media pundits of divergent political persuasions herald the computer-mediated glorified mail service as “a free space where critical and independent voices

can communicate, liberated from the mainstream media's obsession with profits and hostility to the unpopular" (The Nation); or, "not the beginning of authority, but its end." (Harpers).

Even Theodore Roszak, author of *The Making of a Counter Culture*, whose vantage point on the technocracy we've often found insightful or inspiring, expresses an appreciation for some of the Internet benefits in his latest book, *The Cult of Information*. He lauds its "intellectual variety," bound by a "spontaneously democratic and libertarian spirit...without hierarchical domination by any state or corporate interest."

Today, Do-It-Yourself cyber-comrades (not just "nerds") of every disposition occupy "decentralized nodes" of oppositional participation while expressing giddy enthusiasm for the anarchic aspects of the net. The invisible morass of discussions, debates and diatribes among leftoids sometimes resembles a cybernetic café culture, a sort of badass bed and breakfast for theoretical tourists on the media-bloated information highway. At other times, the net resembles bad talk radio, without a host to mediate it.

With the construction of the "AAA Web," "anti-authoritarians, autonomists and anarchists" have their own "node" of radical negation inside the fiber-optics octopus of the future. According to the Madison, Wis.-based *Practical Anarchy* zine, the "techno-dweebs" are exploring the Internet as "an example of anarchy in action" while "organizing online."

## Hyperreality: Unfreedom and Unconnectedness

Beyond the surreal buzzwords and jargon which celebrate the cybertexts of the ideal postmodern media, a few lone voices advocate abstention from e-mail. Rather than simply granting convenience for everyday communication, the "information superhighway" further imposes mechanized intervention in the antiquated realm of activity known as lived experience. In order to fully understand the choice of computerized communion over face-to-face interaction, we must acknowledge a general suppression of the real and a continued alienation from our bodies. E-mail itself is not a primary source of misery in our fragmented lives; rather it is acutely symptomatic of general social trends of accelerated technology coupled with depreciation of sensual reality and deterioration of communities. Two crucial concepts to the contemporaneity of this debate are the terms hyperreal and simulacrum, proposed by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard to represent a complete and final rupture with the real. "Hyperreal simulacra" create a universe of empty signifiers, where the polluted images we consume from advertisements, billboards and video screens are actually more real than reality itself. This is the instant that post-Marxist author and critic Fredric Jameson describes, "When the world thereby momentarily loses its depth and threatens to become a glossy skin, a stereoscopic illusion, a rush of filmic images without density. But is this now a terrifying or exhilarating experience?"

In *The Ecstasy of Communication*, Baudrillard suggests "the world is hardly compatible with the concept of the real which we impose upon it, the function of theory is certainly not to reconcile it, but on the contrary, to seduce, to wrest things from their condition, to force them into an over-existence which is incompatible with that of the real." If we were to follow Baudrillard's pessimistic but poetic lead and seductively suppress "the real" in order to ascend into some synthetic, aesthetic afterworld, would the "real" life of lust, stink and sensation have any place in the haunting supermodern hall of mirrors? Would it not be better to release the real from postmodernity's theoretical prison? Baudrillard was once helpful in elucidating the terms necessary to analyze the evolving spectacle, but his latest writings remain content to bask in the neon glare of hyperreality.

In John Zerzan's review of Baudrillard's *America* (which appears in his recent book *Future Primitive*), he describes Baudrillard's present outlook as "bleak fatalism, presenting, with much hyperbole and abstract phrase-making, a world dominated by electronic media and moving into an almost science-fiction realm of unfreedom and unconnectedness." Baudrillard actually celebrates America's ascent into pure simulation, ironically formulating this nation as both primitive society and utopia. Zerzan concludes: "In America we have a picture and an embrace of high-tech fascism, complete with mystifications and ecstasy."

Even in a climate of copies of copies and signs of signs, we still inhabit our real bodies with a reality based not on the sanitized rationality of science or romantic notions of 19<sup>th</sup> century thought. Our atavistic impulses go deeper, farther back.

Clearly, at this point, we could conclude that Baudrillard's exhilaration is our terror. His "implosion of meaning" amounts to a sinister semanticide, a euphoric euthanasia where even the most precise and poetic writing becomes a self-effacing, euphemism by definition. Pop culture critic Dick Hebdige defines Baudrillard's "image-bloated" simulacrum as "a Leviathan-like lattice work of programmes, circuits, pulses, which functions merely to process and recycle the 'events' produced (excreted) within itself."

## **Snailmail & tactile sensations**

Someone recently sent me via "snailmail," an unsolicited printout of an "electronic magazine." The varying degrees of banality in it took a while to digest. People often send me unsolicited publications for review, usually the more "traditional" printed zine. As a frequent critic of self-published epistles, I expect a certain amount of utter shit to come along every so often, but this particular printout baffled me in new ways.

The joy of magazines for me, of all printed matter, has always been bound-up (pun intended) in format and presentation. But if I am to understand correctly the virtues of virtual media, the formal attributes exist electronically, not on the page but on the screen—in the net, as it were. What are the formal benefits of a printout that should never have been printed at all? I don't subscribe to a BBS (bulletin-board-service for bubble-brained-slackers) because I don't want any more information. I'm an info-junkie in a constant flux of surplus. If I'm hooked on the dizzying delights of the data society, I want to curb my addiction rather than find a new drug. If anything, I want my collide-o-scope of information to slow down.

In response to my nagging Luddism constantly critiquing the superficiality of virtual community, one environmentally aware net-head (aficionado of alternatives within computer configured communication networks) will inevitably chirp like a bird, "BUT IT SAVES PAPER," citing one of the few, if any, ecologically redeeming benefits of "e-mail." But if people consistently make printouts of electronic texts, we'll actually waste more paper...These are the thoughts which cross my mind as I hold a wasted glut of virgin tree-pulp in my fingers. If this were truly a magazine, there'd be pictures and an attractive layout, at least. And if it were truly "online," I wouldn't be reading it. But finally, if the writing itself moved, it would still grab me: I'm still interested in the text. Instead, it's just a lump of mediocre mishmash. An impoverished prosody can't prod me.

Waiting for inspiration to present itself, I spend hours watching my daughter roll and squirm and explore the futon which is her world several hours a day. In these moments of excessive play and vast contemplation, a viable recycling prospect crosses my path. I give Ruby the intellectually maligned printout to examine, and as she begins to crumple, drool and gnaw the zine with glee, its latent assets become apparent. Ah, tactile sensation!

Ruby rolls again onto another interesting text, "A Soft Chunky Book." This is a "Nontoxic, Hand Washable" little treatise of pink, yellow and blue pastel fabric, lightweight and particularly absorbent of abundant baby spit. In its own fabulous and impetuous manner, chunky book is actually an aphoristic gesture of traditional graphic signifiers which, because of its unique cuddly form, significantly challenges modes of representation, even for baby books. Playing with Ruby proves the lazy and lucid can converge; these silly little signs trigger observations which should serve as an appropriate point of entry for this writerly expedition.

## **Bodies as Machines and Alienation from Bodies**

I often feel as though my life is trapped in a futuristic fantasy flick. The insulting ironies of twentieth century industrial destruction remain mediated by surprisingly dreamy and optimistic prognoses of redemption by new commodities, proclamations delivered on the video monitors of a global hi-tech communications empire. The present impasse between old-fashioned "reality" and a gadget-driven sci-fi alternative has already been resolved for many theorists. According to some, not only have we reached the end of history, we have eclipsed humanity, we have seen the end of our species as we know it.

Our flesh has irreversibly become an interface with the machines around us; or as Baudrillard writes, “Our bodies are becoming monitoring screens.” Rather than piggy back the “quantum leaps” in innovation and promote the mired fate of a poorly-wired cyborg hypothesis, we would be better off returning to the animism of our ancestors.

Philosophers throughout this century have attempted to name the locus of our fundamental alienation as serfs in a technocratic kingdom. For some thinkers, we must retreat before language to symbolic thought itself to find the first “computer,” for others, disaffection may begin with clocks or cameras, the steam or internal combustion engines. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Luddites resisted on-the-job automation by smashing knitting-frames, an advanced tool of the time which would seem primitive even to us technophobes. Two essays, “1984: Worse Than Expected?” [FE #316, Spring, 1984] and “Media: Capital’s Global Village” [FE #318, Fall, 1984], written by George Bradford for this journal a decade ago, sparked the discussion for a critique of communications technology. “Since the emergence of mechanization,” writes Bradford in the former essay “with the invention of the telegraph perhaps a representative point of departure, communication has been degraded from a multifaceted, ambivalent, unique and reciprocal relationship between human beings to a repetitive and standardized transmission between machines. The complex dance that goes on among people...was reduced to a relation between mechanisms—an abstract, homogenous ‘message’ passing between a unilateral transmitter and a passive receiver. It is this one-dimensional transmission which characterizes mass media and computers.”

## **Primitively Correct**

In light of our consistently critical writing against the encroachment of modern civilization, we at the *Fifth Estate* have been challenged by the apologists for technology. We have been painted as the absolutist, purist advocates of the “primitively correct.” The vigorous tone of our critical stance could imbue people to question all authorities, rather than be received as some kind of moral prescript for mere asceticism amid the excess of information commodities.

Because all late twentieth century North Americans willingly or begrudgingly participate in the modern world on some level of technocratic humiliation, moralistic denunciations of people who use technology are reductive and do nothing to further a passionate primitivist and anti-technology critique. Our critique of electronic media and other technological tools of the modern era has been directed as much at ourselves as at others. We continually acknowledge the internal contradictions of writing raves on computers for newspapers. This article as an exercise in mediation is by no means immune to this critique.

Far from accepting the technophile tautology, I recognize the superficial quality of all media, mainstream or underground, in a late capitalist society of spectacles. I have not run out of things to say, nor am I reverting to a preverbal state of primordial expression as a gesture of protest (except on rare, beatific occasions). Yet if we desire anarchy as an affirmation of life in all its physical, ludic and libidinal wildness rather than as an anthology of hip phrases and oppositional images, we must start smashing machines and the climate of data glut which insures our dependence on them.

## **The Net: Democracy or Domination?**

If we embrace electronic mail “only” as a networking tool, in “moderate” copulation with computer technology, we lose sight of how even unregulated information exchange between comrades on the web functions as a commodity. The “information highway” is the last frontier for the imperial project of late capitalism. If relative autonomy and abundant piracy flourish today, the legal apparatus of the corporate information state remains poised to control this exchange in the name of profit. In the capitalist model of cyberspace, all information is a commodity and all commodities are information.

Most anarchist advocates of cyberspace claim that their use of the net can exist free of positive or negative value as they liken it to a quick and inexpensive alternative to the post office (“snail mail”) or long-distance phone call. Most radical e-mail enthusiasts access a site through a local university which keeps the costs negligible. However,

even with millions of users, the net remains an elitist hobby of the educated middle and upper classes, the CB radio of the technobourgeoisie. Populist rhetoric supporting the net should be tempered by the fact that the majority of the planet's citizens do not even have access to a telephone, much less a personal computer.

Discussions of democratizing cyberspace conveniently avoid fundamental questions about work, class and who must actually labor to make the machines available to large numbers of people. Who would agree to take a bath in toxic chemicals and increase their chances of cancer while mindlessly assembling computer chips, except under the coercion of wage labor?

While the logic about the democracy of the net carries intellectual currency in liberal circles which have always inadvertently propped up the status quo, radicals should expose this rationalization as glorified "consumer rights" rhetoric. Did the late culture critic Theodore Adorno anticipate these forays into cyberspace? He wrote (to critique another techno-darling of the left, cinema):

"The demand for a meaningful relationship between technique, material and content does not mix well with the fetishism of means... Nevertheless, the favorite argument of the whole- and half-hearted apologists, that the culture industry is the art of the consumer, is untrue; it is the ideology of ideology...The consumers are made to remain what they are: consumers. That is why the culture industry is not the art of the consumer but rather the projection of the will of those in control onto their victims. The automatic self-reproduction of the status quo in its established forms is itself an expression of domination."

As the left-wings of cyberspace fashion the net as a model for a new society, I shudder to contemplate the ethical, spiritual or intellectual content of that society. Yet email bulletin boards exude militant enthusiasm as they consistently buzz of faraway demonstrations and potluck dinners, news from the autonomous zones and info from the info shops. Despite all sorts of proposed innovations (like the encryption of privileged data), activist techies will more likely be roadkill on the info highway along with the rest of us dissenters as they actually help catalog big brother's infiltration, observation, and eavesdropping surveillance unintentionally. The cops or the mainstream media may discover the details of a "clandestine" radical demonstration because it was posted on the net; not only has this occurred more than once, it's become a cliché. Mainstream critics of the environmental left consider this one of our blind spots, evidence of our hypocrisy or the impracticality of our radicalism. They might ask, why do these "monkeywrenchers" and "eco-saboteurs" all own computers and use e-mail? Beyond its ethical inconsistency, using the net to exchange confidential information is impractical. It is one thing to protect internal security with a face-to-face affinity group structure but once in the net, how can we determine anything other than faceless bartering of infobytes? It is easy to confuse speed and efficiency with immediacy or intimacy. Any hope for trust is lost out on the gyrating grid of electronic relations.

The notion of an integrated or interactive technology actually invalidates our intuitive powers as we aimlessly push towards the disintegration of genuine communities and the formation of total commodities. When college dorm residents who would normally relax and study face-to face in common space, now e-mail their study sessions, when we get "closer" to our "neighbors" on far-away nodes across the globe through carpal tunnel communion, but become further alienated from our neighbors down the street, what have we really gained? Computer literacy breeds philosophical illiteracy. Even if we do not use the new technology excessively, we must remain spiritually detached from its tentacles or be swallowed up in the spiritless excess.

## **Post-historical Limbo and Technology's Sacred Hoop**

Ensnared by a giddy, fin-de-siecle fervor, proponents of electronic or virtual community have their logic eclipsed by a post-modern escapism. Roszak writes:

"I sometimes suspect that computer enthusiasts, committed to a dynamic technology that seems always to be moving forward toward even more spectacular breakthroughs, exist in some sort of post-historical limbo. Perhaps this is the most appealing feature of cyberspace: it has no past, only a future. It imposes no responsibilities or obligations, only bright promises and happy diversions."

But this "post-historical limbo" is only liberatory on the level of illusion. An article in the journal *Against Sleep and Nightmare* argues, "In the capitalists' retrospect, the information world is the conclusion to all history. As capitalism

commodifies life, it builds a larger and larger cage for human activity and intelligence. Miniaturization will now let these huge automatic cages exist in one silicone chip.”

No matter how intensely we insist on the integrity of the imagination to forge alternatives within cyberspace, we cannot escape the far-reaching ramifications of being enmeshed in the real net of the techno/petro/ chemical/nuclear/industrial global grid. Even if no apparent hierarchy exists between the users of e-mail, an implicit and equally authoritarian relationship has been formed between machines and people. The computer has become our boss. Computers may grant us the freedom to work at home, but now capital’s primary category of work has colonized our domicile, perhaps our last vestige of play. In a world dominated by the mediation of machines, no autonomous space exists that is free from domination or mediation. This is the horizontal hegemony of technology’s sacred hoop. Some would argue that the current course of capitalism has left its subjects no other alternative; we are under the sway of what popular culture critic Dick Hebdige summarizes as the “larger historical shift into a post-industrial, consumer, media, multi-national or monopoly phase in the development of capitalism.” If the destruction of capitalism remains a goal for radicals, many futurists purport that fundamental change requires the subversive use of technology. However, if the medium itself subverts our own mental and imaginal aptitude, any revolution which requires technology now, insures our dependence on it in the future. Our only recourse is a radical retreat.

Are the tools of technological communication benign instruments without ethical weight other than through the values brought by the operator? Or does the basic aesthetic of life on the information highway hopelessly diminish the quality of living on every level both sensual and intellectual? We should be wary of (post) Marxist optimism vis-a-vis “the means of production” when considering the means of electronic communication. If the net is merely an empty container, a vessel in neo-christian terms, it is no different artistically than the primitive technics of art such as paint and clay, and for the Marxist it’s the same as the factory floor. On the question of “value-free” technology, Bradford writes: “The ‘information’ in which the technicized universe trades is not neutral; it is meaning itself which has been reshaped...The technology certainly does not increase choices—rather, it imposes its own limited, technological range of choices. Its very operation is a form of censorship, a repression, univocal and terrorist. It is not a neutral carrier or ‘medium’ through which we pass a living, subtle and reciprocal communication; human discourse must be mutilated if it is to be transmitted by this machinery. It is, rather, a social code which demands obedience to its command.”

Let us insist on living wild with so many dissident orgasms which don’t agree with the simulacra. I am not an image nor is this tree a linguistic artifact; rather, I am a bundle of molecular revolt filled with flows, with water, with blood, with semen, with internal psychophysical chaos. The net is not merely a mirror of human banality as the science fiction suggests but an amplification device for the banality of human domestication. Computers combine ethical self-destruction and the palliation of genuine experience. As long as we refuse domesticity, humans may aspire to the adventure of abolishing the information age as we unleash the kernel of our real lives, enhanced only by tools of desire, the perceptual power of our natural senses and the magic of the human imagination.

## **Kindred Species, Alien Machines**

In order to bring this speculative discussion back to earth, I turn again to thoughts about my wild daughter Ruby Jazz. Considering the impact of technology and machines on her young life clarifies the ethical issues at stake in a manner that pretentious intellectualism may not. Television colonized my mind 20 years ago. The market pushes an array of computerized gadgets to toddlers today. A child’s relationship with machines teaches sober lessons about the totalitarian tenets of technology. For instance, if computers were akin to radically more primitive tools, why would I bother giving my child crayons and paint to create with when MacPaint or MacDraw are available to use with none of the “mess” of genuine play?

## Enslaved Spectacle of Zoos

Roszak writes: “Introducing students to the computer at an early age, creating the impression that their little exercises in programming and game playing are somehow giving them control over a powerful technology, can be a treacherous deception. It is not teaching them to think in some scientifically sound way; it is persuading them to acquiesce...”

For the breadth of human history before the industrial revolution, children discovered the uniqueness of their own humanity through a relationship with the animals and plants of the natural world. For innocent imaginations, irreversibly tainted by life in the cities and suburbs, the role once played by our extended feral family of furry friends has almost universally been usurped by the ascendancy of the machine.

Roszak continues: “It may mean far more at this juncture in history for children once again to find their kinship with the animals, every one of which, in its own inarticulate way, displays greater powers of mind than any computer can even mimic well. It would indeed be a loss if children failed to see in the nesting birds and the hunting cat an intelligence as well as a dignity that belongs to the line of evolutionary advance from which their own mind emerges...How much ecological sense does it make to rush to close off what remains of that experience for children by thrusting still another mechanical device upon them?”

Indeed, I can only hope Ruby experiences the world from a vantage point less socialized, influenced and inculcated by the separations and dualities of a technologically imposed, pseudo-real existence than my own. Even as a boy, I experienced wilderness in our commodified “National Parks” system: truncated as a theme park, compartmentalized as a summer vacation and sequestered as a special attraction. The “real” world of my youth was already skewed by the arbitrary categories and regimented routines of everyday life.

My only and initial relationship with other creatures of field, sky and stream was mediated by the enslaved spectacle of zoos and aquariums, the domesticity of pets and the humiliation of science experiments. In a society where commodities possess the equivalent of totemic power, I first encountered my amphibious totem animal dead, soaked in formaldehyde on a dissecting table. Even my own wild impulses, like those of so many children, were suppressed and sublimated by the external forces of school and church, and only emerged in the privatized realm of secretive play where kids discovered their own pleasures despite guilty proscriptions against them.

If people ever wake up enough to unplug their souls and unpave the planet, even our moderate participation and obedience in the regime of the gadget over the gift of life will compromise our ability to leave the zombified procession of automatons behind. Even the case for a primal alternative must delve deeply beyond the sentimental nostalgia and modest proposals of contemporary environmentalists.

If we want our grandchildren to discover the ecosphere anew like wild animals with wide eyes, we must uncondition ourselves and our kids from voluntary subjugation in the postmodern zoo.

—Detroit, December 1994

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