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Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility

One Planet, One Net, Many Voices:

The development
of CPSR's
"Principles for the
Internet Era"

by Nathaniel Borenstein

This essay concerns my perspective, as a participant, on the implications of CPSR's "One Planet, One Net" campaign and the draft statement of principles we have produced. An evolving document, the statement aims to reflect an emerging consensus, among concerned citizens of the Net. By their nature, such documents, which articulate a new social foundation, give rise to multiple interpretations. I'd like to offer mine.

The "One Planet, One Net" campaign marks a new direction for CPSR. The board's decision to concentrate on a specific topic for a full year reflects a widely expressed desire to see CPSR more tightly focused on

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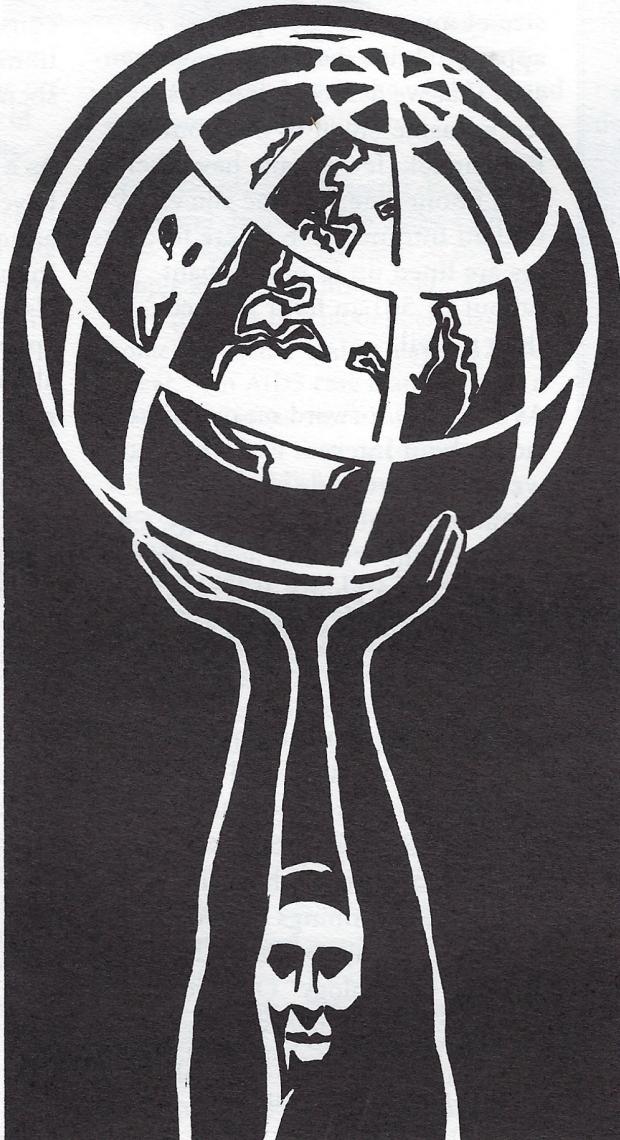
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important issues. The campaign is part of our efforts to redefine CPSR's self-image as an organization and to fully pursue our mandate for constructive activism.

When the CPSR board began looking for the right issue to serve as our focus for an entire program year, a large number of topics surfaced, most of them Internet-related. In 1997, the DNS (domain name system) moved away from being a fundamental technology understood only by geeks, to become a political football with an economic value in the billions of dollars. Issues of censorship and information theft surfaced in a number of ways, such as concerns about the pursuit of technical efficiency in web proxy caching. The urge to protect children from pornography, and society from terrorists, led to technical efforts in the area of content filtering, which has the potential for unprecedented restrictions on freedom of speech, at least in the United States. In turn, concerns about such threats to the freedom of speech have fueled a growing awareness that, although the Internet is a global resource, it has been shaped and dominated by Americans to an extent that may threaten global cultural diversity.

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Meanwhile, less visibly, power struggles behind the scene have quietly begun to threaten what equilibrium previously existed in the governance and management of the Internet. Historically, the Internet has been shaped by an amazingly open and inclusive process, benignly operated by the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF).

Internet governance has been seen by many of the users as a technical issue, not a political one, and thus the process, while open to all, became in practice a "geek meritocracy," in which those who could not muster technically coherent arguments were simply ignored because they lacked credibility.

Those days are clearly ending, but the new governance process has not yet fully emerged. The openness of the prior process, however, has made it particularly susceptible to manipulation by large, well-funded organizations with sufficient technical expertise to obtain basic standing at IETF meetings. In the absence of new governance structures, it is becoming alarmingly easy for large corporations or, potentially, governments to "stack the deck" in IETF deliberations. Enough of the old process still exists to prevent, for the most part, the adoption of solutions that are clearly technically incompetent. But beyond a minimal level of technical plausibility, the outcome of IETF debates is now at least as much a political question as a technical one. The old-timers still playing by the rules of technical excellence increasingly find themselves "blind-sided" by technically inferior, but acceptable actions on the part of commercial or governmental interests.

A diminished technical meritocracy is not inherently a bad thing. In fact, as

the technology stabilizes, one would expect the technologists to play a diminishing role in the process of Internet governance and administration. At issue, is what will take the place of technical meritocracy in the operation of the Internet. In the absence of a coherent answer, the most likely outcome is an Internet dominated by commercial interests. In such a world, the question of what serves the

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public interest could easily be lost amid the commercial noise.

The growing importance of Internet-related policy issues, most dramatically illustrated this year in the battles over control of the DNS, has made it clear that the Internet world lacks two essential components:

- An effective public-interest voice in the Internet governance process
- A set of core principles, or foundation documents, from which to construct a vision of an Internet that works for humanity as a whole

It is these two voids that CPSR's "One Planet, One Net" campaign seeks to fill.

Internet Governance: Reasons to Care

The topic of Internet governance may seem too dry to engage the general public. This perception comes from the Internet's history, in which governance was the province of engineers who focused on protocol details and other technical esoterica. People who are still intimidated by trying to understand why they have to type "<http://www.something.com>" are unlikely to believe they have much to contribute to the development, operation, evolution of the network's infrastructure.

One of our goals in this campaign is to bring sufficient understanding to a broader public to overcome this short-sighted viewpoint. One need not understand paper making or printing to take an active concern in freedom of the press. When Gutenberg was perfecting the printing press, the primary issues related to the production of paper documents were technical, but now they are social and economic. The same shift is occurring, greatly accelerated, with regard to global electronic publication of information, which is increasingly centered on the Internet.

Some claim that the inherent inclination of the Internet toward freedom of speech is irreversible. It is certainly true that, historically, the design of Internet protocols has tended to foster free speech and that users tend to "route around" censorship as if it were a network malfunction. Increasingly, however, counter forces are at work. For example, technology designed to protect children from pornography, could similarly be used, in the context of a jurisdiction with government-controlled Internet access points, to "protect" a whole nation from unwanted ideas. Even well-intentioned current-day efforts to streamline the functioning of the Net or solve perceived technical problems (such as those with the DNS) have resulted in proposals to

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subject the Net to, in effect, centralized global regulation with largely unexplored consequences.

It is fundamental to CPSR's mission that we promote public discussion of the rapidly growing role of the Internet in society, work to dispel myths that portray the Internet as inherently good for society, and identify the social problems Internet technology may actually cause or worsen. If CPSR does not play this role, it is unclear who will. Nor is it clear what role CPSR could take after defaulting on its responsibilities regarding the Net. Recognizing the increasingly central role that the Internet is playing in issues of computers and social policy, the CPSR board decided in August to make Internet governance the focus of the 1997-98 program year.

Crafting the Statement of Principles

The board began the focus on Internet governance by drafting an Internet manifesto—a foundational document defining how Internet technology should serve human society and institutions. Two members, Harry Hochheiser and I, were given the task of initially drafting the document. There has been some misunderstanding of the purpose and role of the statement of principles. It was never intended to be a detailed document that spells out an official CPSR position on all the "hot button" issues related to the Internet today. Rather, it aims to articulate a long-term perspective that will inform the debate over specific issues and help clarify discussions related to specific Internet problems and policies. The statement represents an attempt to find a common ground—basic principles on which a significant majority of Internet citizens can agree, and

which can serve as a rallying point for future public-interest voices. In a rough analogy to American history, the statement of principles is more like the Declaration of Independence than the Constitution and laws of the United States.

The publication process for "One Planet, One Net" is almost certainly unique in the history of political documents. CPSR is using the IETF documentation and standardization procedure. This process is appropriate both because of its openness—it is probably the most open reviewed publication process in history—and because it is the process by which the Internet has historically governed itself, and therefore that process most likely to endow such a foundational document with a widely accepted sense of legitimacy.

In the IETF process, a document first appears as an Internet Draft. It has no status as a standard and no permanent existence; Internet Drafts all expire after a set amount of time. They are designed as "strawman" documents, open to comment from anyone in the world. As comments are received, and issues discussed on the appropriate electronic mailing list, the authors of the document revise it and republish it as another Internet Draft. This process iterates until some level of confidence has been achieved in the document's stability and correctness. It is then typically published as an RFC (Request for Comments), an Internet document that is permanent and uniquely numbered to remain accessible for all time, but which still holds no status as a standard. After the publication of an RFC, when appropriate, a formal standardization process can begin.

CPSR is using the IETF process to publish "One Planet, One Net" in order to solicit comments from the widest possible cross-section of the Internet community. Through the series of publications, public comments, revisions,

and updates, we hope to develop a widespread consensus about these principles, and to make them part of the basic assumptions with which policymakers approach the Internet. As of December 1997, the document has gone through several revisions within CPSR, and we are nearing publication of the second Internet Draft version. Our goal is to publish an RFC by the end of the program year, at which point the document will belong to the Internet community as a whole, rather than CPSR.

The Principles and Their Implications

The core of the "One Planet, One Net" declaration comprise seven basic principles that are intended to serve as the foundation for future thinking about Internet policy. We kept their discussion in the document short, both to facilitate consensus, and to allow for future elaboration. This section of the essay represents my interpretation of the principles and their implications

1. The Net links us all together. Though some might call it obvious, this statement represents the social role of the interconnected set of computer networks we know as the Internet. People want to link their networks together because the utility of such networks seems to rise exponentially with the number of interconnected users. The simple sentence "The Net links us all together" is really a powerful statement of inclusion. The Net doesn't just connect all the world's computer geeks, or upper-class citizens of the developed world, or people who share certain values and beliefs. The Net connects us all. It is no more divisible into nations and property than the air we breathe. To my mind, it is impossible to think clearly about social policies regarding the Internet without the basic understanding that there is only one Net that links together all humanity.

2. The Net must be open and available to all.

While this principle may also seem obvious, there are those who disagree. Certainly, authoritarian governments have already displayed an eagerness to deny the Net access to citizens who might wish to criticize them. Even, democratic governments can be far too eager to deny Net access to prisoners, although man of us would argue that doing so is no more reasonable, in most cases, than denying them access to magazines and correspondence with the outside world. More subtly, those whose goal is to commercialize the Net may be working, albeit inadvertently, to deny access to the economically underprivileged.

The second principle has many important implications. It provides the basis for arguments in favor of universal equal access to the Net, for restraints on governmental controls on citizens, and for a global Internet largely beyond the reach of national and regional governments. Thus, the principle has profound long-range implications regarding the need to limit both governments and commercial forces.

3. People have the right to communicate.

While certain forms of communication, notably free speech, have been recognized as fundamental human rights in many contexts, the Internet forces us to generalize both the nature of communication and the context in which we recognize it as a fundamental right. Clearly, there will be a motivation to deny or severely limit this principle on the part of authoritarian governments, religious fundamentalists, and anyone else who would sacrifice freedom of expression for some other ideal.

To my mind, such limitations inherently threaten human liberty. The third principle constitutes a foundation from which to defend the use of the Internet

for free speech, unpopular minority expression, and political dissent. The scope of the Internet as a publication medium requires a fundamental strengthening of guarantees to freedom of expression. The Internet offers, for the first time in human history, the prospect that any individual can express his or her ideas in a form that will be accessible to anyone else, with virtually no regard to cost or

are sometimes quick to breach privacy in their quest to make another sale.

The fourth principle provides a sound basis upon which to limit the uses of the Net by law enforcement officials and spammers alike. More importantly, to my mind, it provides the philosophical rationale for universal access to cryptographic privacy and anonymous communication. The deceptively simple but categorical statement that privacy is everyone's right directly undermines the efforts of many governments, including that of the United States, to limit popular access to such privacy-enhancing technologies.

5. People are the Net's stewards, not its owners.

People who have invested millions of dollars in Internet infrastructure, notably the telecommunications giants of the world, would undoubtedly like to see themselves as at least partial owners of the Internet. This, I believe, is a perspective that must be resisted. Although those players deserve the chance to obtain substantial economic returns on their investment, ownership is the wrong concept to apply to a resource like the Net. A factory may draw water from a river, but it doesn't own the river, and it doesn't have an unlimited right to take water from it or pour garbage into it.

What the fifth principle implies, therefore, is that society has an interest in the Net that supersedes the economic interests of those who build and maintain it. While their need to earn a profit must be respected, they, in return must respect the fact that the larger needs of society may place limits on their own economic interests.

6. Administration of the Net should be open and inclusive.

In the early days of the Net, policymaking was open to anyone sophisticated

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geography. The third principle is the underlying value that we must maintain to make this prospect a reality.

4. People have the right to privacy. Human beings once had a great deal of privacy by default. In small communities, intrusion by strangers was less of an issue, and some degree of privacy within the community was a tacit social norm. Technology and population growth have, however, steadily whittled away our privacy, making it an increasingly prized commodity. But not everyone agrees about its value. Police and governments are sometimes far too eager to sacrifice privacy in the name of law and order, and commercial interests

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enough to understand the issues. Those days will never return, but the replacement for that process of policymaking must be carefully considered. In the absence of formal mechanism to ensure a fair hearing for the voices of individuals and social advocacy groups, it is far too likely that powerful corporate interests will dominate the administration and governance of the Net.

If heeding this caution leads to a governance structure that borders on anarchy, so be it. The Internet strikes me as inherently an amplification technology, pushing any tendency more toward an extreme, and I find anarchy a far less threatening extreme than monopolistic dominance by powerful corporations.

7. The Net should reflect human diversity, not homogenize it.

The world is full of people who, for religious, philosophical, and other reasons, believe that they have a handle on ultimate truth. Although I respect their right to such beliefs, I deeply fear any attempts to impose such absolutes on others. If God reveals the truth to me, I will no doubt accept it, but if you say God has revealed the truth to you, I reserve the right to a certain skepticism.

Unless we are willing to enshrine one set of belief globally, we must embrace human diversity as part of what makes our lives worth living. In the context of the Internet, welcoming diversity means making an ongoing commitment to multilingualism, multiculturalism, and equal access for all people. Despite all the hype and enthusiasm about how the Internet has the potential to foster diversity and equality, the Net has almost certainly already done more harm than good in this regard, by further promoting English as a universal

language and American culture as a universal context for discourse. The seventh principle implies that we should work to remove the linguistic and cultural limitations that currently make the Net a force for uniformity in the world.

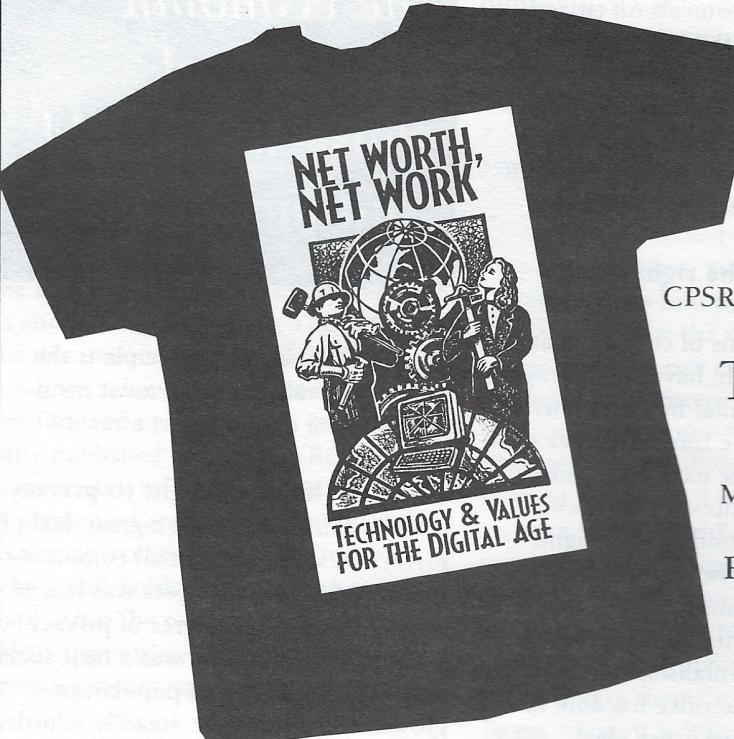
A Call to Action

The "One Planet, One Net" principles continue to evolve. Interested parties can still contribute to their evolution, elaboration and propagation. CPSR encourages comments on the principles, which you can send to the electronic mailing list onenetdiscuss@cpsr.org. These comments will be incorporated into the next step in

the CPSR campaign, which is the production of a series of fact sheets and white papers that elaborate on the implications of these principles for vital aspects of the Internet. We will then distribute the principles and supplementary materials through our Website, Newsletters, Chapter forums and special announcements. CPSR members and interested citizens of the Net are welcome to help us in all stages of this effort.

Nathaniel Borenstein is a Special Director of CPSR and a member of the board.

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