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Bad Attitude: Business as Usual on the Infobahn

By James Cappio

Sleeping better at night knowing that Bill Clinton is your president? No more bolting upright in bed, feebly clawing at sweat-stained sheets, waking from scraps of fevered dreams in which the Republicans are re-elected and our information technology policy is set by a man who doesn't know a UPC scanner when he sees one? Don't go back to sleep just yet: If the trend in federal information policy that emerged in Vice President Al Gore's January 1994 speech at the University of California at Los Angeles continues, the National Information Infrastructure (NII) will be less like the most revolutionary advance in technology since Gutenberg and more like - well, Prodigy.

The vice president's UCLA speech, like other Clinton administration information policy pronouncements, set forth five objectives for a federal information policy. None are concrete enough for anybody to oppose. But when government and industry announce an "emerging national consensus" in favor of apple pie, they are more likely to deliver a mouthful of Ritz crackers; why would the recipe offered by the vice president be an exception?

The NII would scarcely be worth building if it offered no more than 500 channels of MTV, no matter how holographic, ambient, and jacked in to the gills. Its real payoff, its visionary promise, would be the possibility of an "Athens without slaves" or a "Jeffersonian democracy" in which people can provide information as easily as they consume it. A networked world offers the possibility of many-to-many communication, permitting widely separated individuals to bind themselves into collectives.

The vice president seemed to embrace this vision in a December 1993 speech at the National Press Club when he promised that "each person will turn from being just a consumer to being a consumer and a

provider." But as we've seen at UCLA, such language has a ring more of rhetoric than reality. True many-to-many capability, an inevitability in December, was demoted to a project for future research by January, when Gore said: "We must also explore the future of noncommercial broadcasting."

But what about that nascent national many-to-many network, the Internet? It's under siege. Mitch Kapor, who has called for the privatization of the Internet since at least 1991, acknowledges that free expression by individuals requires government protection in a privatized Internet. But if the private communications industry cannot be trusted on its own to preserve many-to-many connections that already exist, how likely is it to ensure that such connections will be built into the NII?

In his manifesto in *Wired* 1.3 ("[Where Is the Digital Highway Really Heading?](#)" page 53), Kapor can only offer the hope that a "logic of self-interest" will lead the cable and telephone companies to "permit the greatest diversity of content and services." The problem isn't so much Kapor's Panglossian faith in an invisible hand that will mesh public good with corporate objectives, but his assumption that the "enlightened self-interest" in question is profit. Diversity will maximize profit only by assuring the largest possible customer base. Since when does mass appeal mean the flourishing of free, autonomous, yet interdependent individuals that is the hallmark of a "Jeffersonian democracy"?

In his National Press Club speech, the vice president was closer to the truth: "We'll turn from consumers into providers. In a way, this change represents a kind of empowerment." Certainly, access to networks such as the NII is the power issue of our time. Unfortunately, the vice president went on to liken individuals under the "communications revolution" to mere instrumental sources of informational "added value" to the economy, like factory workers. That's precisely the wrong analogy if networks are to form the basis of an electronic "Jeffersonian democracy." The Industrial Revolution took power out of factory workers' hands, depriving them of control over their own production by the particular way it harnessed the division of labor. Adam Smith's workers, who specialized in making pin heads or pin shafts, had no control over their ultimate assembly and disposition.

The real significance of the Information Revolution is that a worldwide network centered on true many-to-many communication is our first chance since the Industrial Revolution to take large-scale power back into our own hands. Consider the forces that will actually build the NII. If, as the existence of a true many-to-many world network implies, everybody has the power to make artistic products of any kind and to distribute them to anybody on the planet essentially for the asking, the need for an entertainment industry suddenly disappears. Because the issue is power - the precondition of profit - there's about as much chance that the communications industry will build a many-to-many network out of "enlightened self-interest" as there is that the Clinton administration will willingly abandon the Clipper encryption standard. Ignoring poet Audre Lorde's admonition that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house, Kapor trusts that the master will hand over the tools.

One historical example might seem to offer grounds for optimism. The telephone is interactive and has a fair (though not perfect) claim to universal access. But its universality did not arise from the competitive private pursuit of self-interest. Early in the century, AT&T gained dominance by first creating and monopolizing the market for long lines and then using that control to eliminate its regional competitors. Even so, it only provided universal service because of the profound personal democratic beliefs of its president, Theodore Vail.

The AT&T example also helps show that universal access, a Clinton administration promise, doesn't guarantee many-to-many interactivity. The telephone is one-to-one; people use it to produce and communicate their own thoughts. Thus, it seems to provide a model for the NII. Yet the proposed NII contains no similar structural feature to ensure that its users will be able to produce and distribute their own products. This degree of many-to-many interactivity is necessary, I suggest, for a truly liberating redistribution of power.

I would love to have the Clinton administration to prove me wrong by proposing a revised Communications Act that contains strong protections for many-to-many communications. I'm not counting on it, though. The most the vice president promised at UCLA is nondiscriminatory access - an antitrust concept intended

to protect small and start-up information purveyors from the monopoly power of their big brothers. No doubt people will turn the NII to their own communicative ends, to the extent the architecture permits, but I find this to be small comfort. Many-to-many communications should be the cornerstone of federal information policy, not the object of guerrilla war.

James Cappio (cappio@panix.com) lives, writes, and practices law in New York City.

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