

The World Wide Web: Radical Revolutionary

What do Che Guevara, Thomas Jefferson and Mao Tse-tung all have in common?

They are all second-rate, grossly ineffective revolutionaries when compared to the World Wide Web. The most powerful instrument of social change has always been information (the pen is mightier than the sword). The Web is poised to deliver more information to more people...

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What do Che Guevara, Thomas Jefferson and Mao Tse-tung all have in common?

The most powerful instrument of social change has always been information (the pen is mightier than the sword). The Web is poised to deliver more information to more people, regardless of their place in the power structure, than has ever been delivered in the history of the world. And the impact of this indiscriminate dispersal of knowledge may, in the long run, cost many thousands of lives.

Like wave rings in a pond after the stone is thrown, the impact of the Web is just beginning. It will continue to increase its influence over individuals, cultures and governments as more and more people from all walks of life come together online.

The First Wavelets

In my industry, market research, the Web is already making a profound impact. I might have paid \$15-20 per interview using traditional research methods and charged my clients \$60 an interview to cover labor and overhead. The same interview on the Web could cost me anywhere from 30 cents to absolutely nothing! What do I charge my clients for that? Formerly a tool almost exclusively for the Fortune 1000, large-sample, sophisticated market research is now becoming available to the smallest one-man shops. In business, the playing field just got a little more level.

Retail channels, of course, will be forever altered by the Web. In 1995, \$2 billion in retail goods were sold over the Web. In 1998, this figure exploded to \$23 billion. For the year 2002, it is forecasted to be \$440 billion! The Web allows consumers to comparison shop without leaving the couch. The Web allows consumers to search for items quickly and easily. Ever search for, say, toothpicks at a grocery store? It can take hours. Retail location will no longer be the silver bullet it has been in the past. Before the Web, physical distance was a barrier to information. No longer. The Web has destroyed our definition of distance like Einstein destroyed our concept of time. Disseminating information over the Web will completely restructure the retail landscape. And in the marketplace, more information generally means greater competition. And competition leads to lower prices and/or greater convenience for consumers.

How we search for and compensate labor will also be completely changed. My firm recently needed to find a Web programmer with some very specific and advanced skills. Where did our Web guru turn to search for such a rare person? The Web, of course. Not only was he able to

identify several qualified people in a matter of hours, but there were no costs to us. No head-hunting fees. The best man for the job happened to be in Norway. Labor rates there are much lower than here (temporarily). Not only does the Web instantaneously create a global labor pool, but with time, labor rates will necessarily stabilize globally, as well. The Eurodollar? Small minded. How about Web-Bucks? A truly global economy is but a few mouse clicks away.

Larger Pond Rings

But this is just the tip of the iceberg. The real revolution is still on the horizon. At stake is the social and political fabric of America. And the world.

Desktop computers (along with video games) have been blamed for the alienation of a generation. Ironically, the Web is the antidote to computer-induced isolation. Gamers now play each other online, often while talking to each other on the telephone. Shut-ins (old or seriously ill people who cannot leave their homes) can now travel a virtual world, essentially freed from their physical burdens. They can visit all the major tourist attractions around the globe, meet new friends, develop new hobbies, enroll in college.

Families historically lived geographically close to one another. In one generation, American families have gotten extremely mobile. Families are now often scattered across large distances. And distance inhibits information. As a consequence, families have become disconnected. Until recently, I would talk to my 73 year old mother once every few months. I bought her WebTV for Christmas and I now converse with her via email almost every day. When high-speed cable modems bring video conferencing to everyone who has cable TV, my mother and I will talk face-to-face more often than when I was a teen-ager living in her home.

But the real power of the revolution is yet to come. The Web has the potential to provide children access to valuable information, before their potential is squandered. Disadvantaged children, who in the past were denied opportunities not because of lack of talent but due to lack of access, will in the future be better equipped to fulfill their potential than ever before. A poor kid from a bad neighborhood may be interested in physics and have a talent for it. He (or she) will have access to the world's greatest university libraries, articles and technical papers. He will be able to join chat rooms to discuss issues of interest with people of like mind. He will make connections, build personal relationships, gain information that will open doors for him that would have remained forever closed without the Web. The world's body of knowledge will expand dramatically as less intellect is wasted by socio-economic inequality. More knowledge means more new products. New products mean greater economic growth and higher standards of living. It also means that one smart kid, when given access to information, will forever change the lives and opportunities of his children, and their children, and their children. Literally forever.

Tsunami

But the wave rings in our pond will eventually crash against the shore. The consequences of information access will inevitably turn violent. Thomas Jefferson wrote that a people will not act to overthrow their government until their lives become intolerable. How one defines intolerable is directly related to how clearly one can see the grass on the other side of the hill. When an oppressed people are unaware that anyone else is better off than they are, they are more likely to accept their lot. But when they are bombarded with information about lifestyles that they could not have even dreamed of on their own, of people just like them, people no more deserving than themselves, living healthier, richer, freer, the definition of intolerable gets considerably closer to home.

It is not a coincidence that the People's Republic of China (PRC) is currently scouring the Web for dissidents. And then arresting them. But the PRC is doomed to fail in this effort. In fact, the PRC (and many other governments like it) will eventually be forced to change its position on human rights or it will simply be overthrown. Information will create a tidal wave of human protest that will not be denied. The Web makes Radio Free Europe seem like a child whispering in the dark.

Information is the ultimate Pandora's Box. Once it escapes, there is no way to bring it back. Despite the best efforts of the NRA to convince us otherwise, guns are not our greatest defense against an oppressive government, information is. Dictators universally control and restrict education systems and mass media to maintain dominance. Why? Who are the first revolutionaries? Often, it's students and priests, the only informed people outside the power structure.

But the Web, with its increasingly ubiquitous reach, will make students of us all. The revolution has begun. Are you ready?

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