

Barlow Paints Internet as New Community and Challenge to Concepts of Property

by Sue Burch

John Perry Barlow, a self described "cognitive dissident," a lyricist for the Grateful Dead, former Republican county chairman, retired Wyoming cattle farmer, and co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, delivered an eclectic keynote address at AALL's Annual Meeting luncheon. He challenged existing power bases, digitized intellectual property, censorship, and lawyers—all in the first five minutes!

Barlow's fast ride in a free-fall monologue charmed, beguiled, and often surprised his audience. He inspired and jolted us, and forced us re-examine the dramatically changing information world confronting law librarians. His eloquent vision of a free virtual community had a kind of lyricism to it. He conjured up images of an unconquered virtual world embodied by the rugged individualism and liberty of bygone frontiers, yet struggling to find a haven where it can't be tamed or harnessed and fighting for its freedom. His ominous glimpse into the dark side of this digital world showed a future filled with countless technological and social challenges that have the power to alter and ultimately shape all aspects of a wired universe for generations to come.

He began with an eloquent description of communities, describing the Internet as a "free virtual community" much like his small

town in Wyoming. He complimented our "community." Barlow, moved by the tributes to our Gallagher Award winners, was impressed that "one-third of the membership came together once a year." He was pleased to be among librarians, feeling it his "lot to discourage lawyers and encourage librarians."

Barlow then launched into his complex and often controversial views of the Internet, "a great nervous system capable of turning human minds into human mud [but also the] most profound technological event since fire [that will bring about a] profound change in what it is to be human. The Internet is creating one social space where every single person may gather—and it's not defined like the physical world. [It is] going to cause the renegotiation of power on this planet."

Explaining that society has been based on its ability "to control bodies and institutions," he queried how we will deal with an environment where "no one has a body and no property—and anything [we] do to impose law is easy to circumvent."

In cyberspace, "new precedents will be made every day—often in just a conversational way.... Technology today is moving faster than the law.... [The] real codes of cyberspace are ethical, not legal.... Cyberspace architecture defines the politics. It also naturally defines itself with liberty and regards censorship as a technical malfunction."

With West Group President/CEO Brian Hall sitting right in front of him, Barlow fearlessly confronted digitized intellectual property. "Cyberspace has to deal with how authority is created.... Some are trying to assemble authority on the basis of owning page numbers.... That group is not going to win."

This new technological world represents "the first time that anyone, anywhere, no matter how odious the individual, can get into cyberspace when they want, at zero cost. This is the world that we're building for our descendants.... [Its creators are]

guerilla warriors on the battlefield of liberty. [This is our] great chance to build a free cyberspace world or our chance to screw it up." We must stridently prevent the law from trying "to own things.... Property is a thing, a noun. Ideas, expressions, information are verbs....

Anytime you try to own verbs, you're in trouble. It's inefficient. You simply can't."

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He flatly condemned copyright in cyberspace and tried to debunk the "widespread myth spread by publishers that ... [reasonable people] will want an ongoing return on their [creative] investments." Once, sharing this view, the Grateful Dead tried to stop bootleg taping at concerts. Later he realized these tapes were creating lots of new "deadheads" and didn't diminish record sales at all.

During a period of self-evaluation in his 40s, he discovered cyberspace, which might "be the answer to a world that's disconnected." In modern society, "law counted more than ethics ... there was no sense of the extended family, and ... there was an increase in the prevailing conditions of social depravity."

Wondering how "to reconnect America to the rest of the species," he returned to the concept of the community. "We've destroyed the village green, the well, and the post office steps where we used



Keynote Speaker
John Perry Barlow

Karen M. Covell

to gather." We can regain this sense of community in the Internet.

Given that Fortune 500 companies have lost 11 million jobs, the "fastest growing employment is self-employment and the second is small businesses started and owned by women.... [Cyberspace is an] inherently feminine environment because it's made out of relationships, there's no heavy lifting, and people can't use physical threats."

Remarkably, the Internet has "created an [information] economy that's been unnoticed [and] unlike the physical economy, where entropy rules.... If you go out, create a toaster, and then sell that toaster, you don't have it anymore, but some other person does! [But when you] have an idea and you sell that idea, not only do you still have the idea, but so does someone else, and it's increased in value." In an information economy "we can facilitate that economy because librarians are game wardens and stewards of the game preserves."

Barlow, emphasizing the importance of "governance, not government," wondered

how we'll create an "information society that will return to ethics. [We have the] opportunity to help make this transition in cyberspace, and we can be facilitators of that flow" but, he cautioned, "whenever technology wreaks change in society, the next thing that happens is a lot of people get killed." After Gutenberg came the Hundred Years War, then the Thirty-Years War. His "modest ambition" is to change society by "ridding us of the broadcast media" that provide propaganda for society to create a "reality distortion field."

Barlow concluded that we're now at one of those momentous periods, but he doesn't want us to go the way we have in the past. And "we're in a position to not have that happen."

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"They seemed to be getting along so well..." Thomson CEO Brian Hall chats with Keynote Speaker Barlow after the talk.



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Marc Silverman



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