

(NOTE: In anticipation of exactly what has happened — a “The requested URL /btoday/20001206/interview.html was not found on this server” message when you click on the link — I made an MSWord doc copy of this interview and then turned it into a PDF file so I could post it to my website until the link was repaired. Sorry I didn't notice the broken link earlier! – JRW)

(from the <http://www.india-today.com/btoday/20001206/interview.html> webpage)

INTERVIEW: JOHN PERRY BARLOW

## **"What stops free flow of information is dangerous"**

John Perry Barlow He's a man of many parts. 53-year-old John Perry Barlow has been a cattle-rancher in Wyoming and a lyricist for the Grateful Dead. In his newest avatar, he is the founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to preserving the rights of 'digital citizens'. Barlow was the first to use the William Gibson coined term cyberspace to the global electronic space in 1990. The man whom Yahoo Internet Life calls the Thomas Jefferson of cyberspace was in India recently and BT's Roshni Jayakar met up with him for a snappy tete-a-tete.

**Q. John, you wrote what you term your manifesto, A Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace, way back in 1996. Are you thinking of making any changes in it?**

A. I suppose I should come up with revised edition. I want to make it more obvious that I didn't think that cyberspace was sublimely detached from the real world. It isn't... it's not like never never land. It bears the same relationship to the physical world that the mind does to the body. They are intimately connected, but are quite different. I'd also probably make it slightly less strident... I was angry when I wrote it.

You are a believer in independence on the Net. Does that mean ownership will not work on the web?

**I believe there is no property in cyberspace.** The internet is a social space that is developing a political identity. It does not have much respect for imposed authority. It's like declaring you own your friends or your children.

**Does that mean there is no need for governance on the web?**

**We do need governance. That's different from government.** Government is something that is imposed in a particular place by force and I don't think you can use force where people don't have bodies and don't have material possessions that can be confiscated. I also don't think that any government has a natural authority over the entire world. Any effort to create a government that is global has only resulted in paralysing bureaucracy. You look at the United Nations. It is not quite useless, but pretty close.

But, there is governance in cyberspace and it comes in two forms. First, in (the form of) social ethics of the people who are inhabiting that region and doing social and economic transactions there. And these ethics, despite the absence of law, have been really good. I

haven't, for example, seen a single instance where somebody passed off somebody else's work as his own and tried to make commercial profit from plagiarised work even though it would be quite easy to do (on-line). The only thing that prevents that is the social code among the inhabitants of cyberspace. The second (form of governance), is through technology. This is an area where technological architecture defines the political space. And the people who designed the internet had a very good sense of what they were doing-what kind of space they were creating and what its characteristics would be. They were all people who cared a lot about freedom. I believe internet will be the principal factor behind the withering away of the nation-states and other entities that impose controls.

**But many people think some form of regulation is necessary simply because they claim the web hosts lots of dangerous information...**

What's dangerous? **The only thing that is dangerous is the one that is designed to stop free flow of information.** When I was a cattle-rancher, I had to blow up beaver dams-these animals were building dams in my irrigation ditches. So, I went to an US force service office and got a little book called Blasters' Guide that is still available. It taught me how to mix basic fertiliser and diesel fuel to create the same kind of bomb used in Oklahoma city. Should this not be allowed on the internet?

**What about patents and intellectual property rights?**

**I don't believe in intellectual property.** The whole term is a recent invention. **Copyright was never meant to be a form of property; it was a temporary license on a monopoly to express.** You didn't hear the term intellectual property more than 25 years ago. This is the invention of **large organisations that are trying to own creativity as though it were** real estate or steel or some other kind of **physical stuff.**

**Why are you such an anti-company guy?**

Well, I was brought to India by a company (laughs). I am opposed to industrial practices for anything but industrial ends. If you are going to make cars this is the way to do it. If you are going to make ideas this is not the way to do it. I find that most of the practices of the industrial period are just as bad as Karl Marx said they were. But **technology has made workers reconfigurable: in this so-called information economy, I see a workforce composed entirely of free agents.**

**And the internet will make this happen...**

You can't alienate somebody from the means of production. Not in the information economy when he is the means of production. I am presently working on what I call dot communism-basically seeing the extent to which we can create an economy in cyberspace, which is based on sharing rather than proprietary restriction. In the world of ideas, sharing is a practical thing to do: the more access I have to others' work, the better

mine becomes; and it's a virtuous cycle all the way round. The more we tell each other, the more we can learn.

**Do you see technology creating a new social order?**

I see the fact that **we have a large working anarchy in the internet**. I think that inspires people to try practical anarchy as a social form in the physical world. I was at a 'festival' in Nevada where there were 35,000 people 'without any laws' for a week and I saw absolutely no bad behaviour. I didn't see anybody abusing anybody. There was a common stake everybody had in making that thing work. Granted, it was only for a week. And most of the people who were there were involved in the internet: quite a few companies in Silicon Valley had just closed down for the week, since most of their employees were going to be there. So, I think it is starting to bleed through into the physical world.

**I am a fan of anarchy**. During my visit to India, I've seen anarchy working beautifully here.