



TEXT SUPPORT

Carolyn Weaver is the producer and host of Tech Books, in its third season on Tech TV, Book Television, Court TV, MSNBC Canada and Rogers Television.
carolyn@fineprintonline.com



In conversation with
Michael Strangelove

EMPIRES OF THE MIND,
DIGITAL PIRACY AND THE
ANTI-CAPITALIST MOVEMENT

RATING: ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

MANY CRITICS SEE THE INTERNET as an extension of the corporate power base. Michael Strangelove says it is in fact a challenge to that base and asks us to consider looking at the ramifications of the Internet in a new light in his book, *Empires of the Mind, Digital Piracy and the Anti-Capitalist Movement*. The book is compelling because it raises valid points and can also lead one to simultaneously agree and disagree with some conclusions. A book that provokes the reader to think and rethink leaves most readers with sharper thoughts and opinions.

You note that capitalism as a form of empire is not a new concept, but that something new has appeared within capitalism's "Empire of Mind." Please explain.

In June 2004 Google returned

1,480,000 hits for the word "boycott." Now we find 14,200,000 hits on Google for "boycott" — a ten-fold increase in slightly more than one year. This is a tiny indication that, within capitalism, uncontrolled expression is a problem for the corporate sector and the ruling elite. People are angry and the Internet allows us to express our discontent in a way never before possible.

Type in the word "failure" in Google and the first hit is George W. Bush — the powerful cannot hide behind spin masters in the Internet era. The new thing is what the Internet enables within capitalism — unconstrained expression. Because of the Internet we now have a much higher lever of uncontrolled personal expression in the public arena.

Over the past century the economic system (capitalism) benefited from a highly controlled communication environment. Control over expression, over cultural production, and over public dissent is slipping away.

You note that there is a sense throughout the corporate sector that

FAST
4

Favorite author:
Did greatly enjoy C.S. Lewis

Favorite Web site:
Google

A good book...
Is read more than once.

Guilty pleasure:
Video games

control over the audience is slipping away. In what sense?

It is harder to program audience viewing choices. It is harder to get the audience to pay for something they can get for free on the Internet. There is no content control on the Net, and no way to be certain that corporate content will dominate the online experience.

You point out that commercial media does not allow audience participation in content creation, but are reality TV shows not a form of that? In what way has the Internet perhaps

driven an interest in this sort of television program?

Reality TV is driven by its economics, not by audience choice — it is a very inexpensive format which allows for a high level of product placement within the script. So we need to be careful before we buy into the notion that the audience has a free hand in dictating what is on TV. Does anyone really believe that reality TV represents any meaningful level of audience participation?

The Net's democratization of content creation renders any claims about enhanced audience participation in commercial TV production rather shallow.

We can pretty well put anything on the Net, and once done, anything put on the Net is just about impossible to remove. The last thing the TV industry and the corporate sector desire is real full blown audience participation of the sort the Net presently enables.

It is one thing to have massive international content creation by individuals, but it is another thing to create

content that draws an audience. The battle for audience on all fronts has become ferocious and thus the antics used are sometimes over the top or in poor taste. What are the long-term ramifications in the fight for audience attention that technology has unleashed?

TV is going to have to compete against unfiltered reality (to the extent that such a thing is at all possible), because that is what the Net provides access to. Reality is the Net's competitive advantage, and the FCC and other factors will always stand in the way of commercial TV representing the world the way an uncensored global community of habitual content producers can and do.

In what way do you feel that the analytical material produced for the corporate sector is compromised?

The Net-driven stock market bubble of the late 1990s demonstrated that stock market research analysts were substantially compromised by the need to sell worthless stock to naive investors.

That was not an aberration, that is business as usual.



INSIDER

One thousand bottles of beer on the wall

BEER AND CODING GO TOGETHER LIKE BEER AND industrial-league hockey — it's hardly necessary to the task, but it's sure nice to have a couple of cold ones afterward, and if you sneak one in on the bench, nobody cares as long as you can still skate.

The open source community has had its annual beer hike (officially, the LinuxBier Wanderung) since 1999, criss-crossing hop-friendly corners of Europe under the emblem of a tipsy penguin with a laptop tucked under one arm, and its other hand — er, wing — clasp a stein. It's a testament to the organization that trekking for six years in six countries, they haven't lost a single hiker to a murder at the hands of the locals. Even more impressive when you consider last year's hike was in Scotland.

There's even an open source beer recipe, courtesy of the University of Copenhagen, published under a Creative Commons licence — brew it for fun or profit, but you have to credit the creators and publish any refinements to the recipe under the same terms.

My point, and I do have one (apologies to Ellen DeGeneres), is that a recent contest by Romanian anti-virus software company BitDefender has applied the know-your-audience principle to recruiting hackers to test its software.

BitDefender is inviting Linux professionals and enthusiasts to find ways to crash the new release. The most thorough tester wins 1,000 German beers and a trip to Romania to meet Count Dracula (the country's most famous native son, next to Nicolae Ceausescu) and the BitDefender development team (not quite so famous, even in Romania). The tester who comes up with the most creative way to crash the program gets a special "Crash Test Dummy" prize.

Interested hackers can apply at the BitDefender Web site. Cautionary note to winners: Bats carry rabies. Don't pound back too many around that Dracula guy.

(Note: If you are Scots or Romanian and were offended by the above — hey, it was your turn. Wait 'til we get hold of them Swiss . . .)



ANOTHER REASON TO STUDY COBOL

There's the old joke about the 1990s programmer awakening from suspended animation to hear the president of the U.S. say, "It's the Year 10,000, and we heard you know a little Cobol." Apparently, we needn't wait that long. There's a reasonably well-known date-handling error in Unix that could cause Y2K-scale, um, havoc in 2038. Your kids will just be getting old enough to want to pad that retirement fund. Make sure they know a little Cobol.

PSST! Got an inside scoop? Email us at insider@itbusiness.ca