

# The Net and The Web

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## Pirate Utopias

The sea-rovers and corsairs of the 18th century created an 'information network' that spanned the globe: primitive and devoted primarily to grim business, the net nevertheless functioned admirably. Scattered throughout the net were islands, remote hideouts where ships could be watered and provisioned, booty traded for luxuries and necessities. Some of these islands supported 'intentional communities', whole mini-societies living consciously outside the law and determined to keep it up, even if only for a short but merry life.

Some years ago I looked through a lot of secondary material on piracy hoping to find a study of these enclaves - but it appeared as if no historian has yet found them worthy of analysis. (William Burroughs has mentioned the subject, as did the late British anarchist Larry Law - but no systematic research has been carried out.) I retreated to primary sources and constructed my own theory, some aspects of which will be discussed in this essay. I called the settlements 'Pirate Utopias'.

Recently Bruce Sterling, one of the leading exponents of Cyberpunk science fiction, published a near-future romance based on the assumption that the decay of political systems will lead to a decentralized proliferation of experiments in living: giant worker-owned corporations, independent enclaves devoted to 'data piracy', Green-Social-Democrat enclaves, Zerowork enclaves, anarchist liberated zones, etc. The information economy that supports this diversity is called the Net; the enclaves (and the book's title) are *Islands in the Net*.

The medieval Assassins founded a 'state' which consisted of a network of remote mountain valleys and castles, separated by thousands of miles, strategically invulnerable to invasion, connected by the information flow of secret agents, at war with all governments, and devoted only to knowledge. Modern technology, culminating in the spy satellite, makes this kind of autonomy a romantic dream. No more pirate islands! In the future the same technology - freed from all political control - could make possible an entire world of autonomous zones. But for now the concept remains precisely science fiction - pure speculation.

Are we who live in the present doomed never to experience autonomy, never to stand for one moment on a bit of land ruled only by freedom? Are we reduced either to nostalgia for the past or nostalgia for the future? Must we wait until the entire world is freed of political control before even one of us can claim to know freedom? Logic and emotion unite to condemn such a supposition. Reason demands that one cannot struggle for what one does not know; and the heart revolts at a universe so cruel as to visit such injustices on our generation alone of humankind.

To say that "I will not be free till all humans (or all sentient creatures) are free" is simply to cave in to a kind of nirvana-stupor, to abdicate our humanity, to define ourselves as losers.

I believe that by extrapolating from past and future stories about 'islands in the net' we

may collect evidence to suggest that a certain kind of 'free enclave' is not only possible in our time but also existent. All my research and speculation has crystallized around the concept of the TEMPORARY AUTONOMOUS ZONE (hereafter abbreviated TAZ). Despite its synthesizing force for my own thinking, however, I don't intend the TAZ to be taken as more than an essay ('attempt'), a suggestion, almost a poetic fancy. Despite the occasional Ranter-ish enthusiasm of my language I am not trying to construct political dogma. In fact I have deliberately refrained from defining the TAZ - I circle around the subject, firing off exploratory beams. In the end the TAZ is almost self-explanatory. If the phrase became current it would be understood without difficulty...understood in action.

### **The Net and the Web**

We've spoken of the Net, which can be defined as the totality of all information and communication transfer. Some of these transfers are privileged and limited to various elites, which gives the Net a hierarchic aspect. Other transactions are open to all-so the Net has a horizontal or non-hierarchic aspect as well. Military and Intelligence data are restricted, as are banking and currency information and the like. But for the most part the telephone, the postal system, public data banks, etc. are accessible to everyone and anyone. Thus within the Net there has begun to emerge a shadowy sort of counter-Net, which we will call the Web (as if the Net were a fishing-net and the Web were spider-webs woven through the interstices and broken sections of the Net). Generally we'll use the term Web to refer to the alternate horizontal open structure of info-exchange, the non-hierarchic network, and reserve the term counter-Net to indicate clandestine illegal and rebellious use of the Web, including actual data-piracy and other forms of leeching off the Net itself. Net, Web, and counter-Net are all parts of the same whole pattern-complex--they blur into each other at innumerable points. The terms are not meant to define areas but to suggest tendencies.

(Digression: Before you condemn the Web or counter-Net for its 'parasitism', which can never be a truly revolutionary force, ask yourself what 'production' consists of in the Age of Simulation. What is the 'productive class'? Perhaps you'll be forced to admit that these terms seem to have lost their meaning. In any case the answers to such questions are so complex that the TAZ tends to ignore them altogether and simply picks up what it can use. 'Culture is our Nature' - and we are the thieving magpies, or the hunter/gatherers of the world of CommTech.)

The present forms of the unofficial Web are, one must suppose, still rather primitive: the marginal zine network, the BBS networks, pirated software, hacking, phone-phreaking, some influence in print and radio, almost none in the other big media - no TV stations, no satellites, no fibre-optics, no cable, etc., etc. However the Net itself presents a pattern of changing/evolving relations between subjects ('users') and objects ('data'). The nature of these relations has been exhaustively explored, from McLuhan to Virilio. It would take pages and pages to 'prove' what by now 'everyone knows'. Rather than rehash it all, I am interested in asking how these evolving relations suggest modes of implementation for the TAZ.

The TAZ has a temporary but actual location in time and a temporary but actual location in space. But clearly it must also have 'location' in the Web, and this location is of a different sort, not actual but virtual, not immediate but instantaneous. The Web not only pro-

vides logistical support for the TAZ, it also helps to bring it into being; crudely speaking one might say that the TAZ 'exists' in information-space as well as in the 'real world'. The Web can compact a great deal of time, as data, into an infinitesimal 'space'. We have noted that the TAZ, because it is temporary, must necessarily lack some of the advantages of a freedom which experiences duration and a more-or-less fixed locale. But the Web can provide a kind of substitute for some of this duration and locale - it can inform the TAZ, from its inception, with vast amounts of compacted time and space which have been 'subtilized' as data.

At this moment in the evolution of the Web, and considering our demands for the 'face-to-face' and the sensual, we must consider the Web primarily as a support system, capable of carrying information from one TAZ to another, of defending the TAZ, rendering it 'invisible' or giving it teeth, as the situation might demand. But more than that: If the TAZ is a nomad camp, then the Web helps provide the epics, songs, genealogies and legends of the tribe; it provides the secret caravan routes and raiding trails which make up the flow lines of tribal economy; it even contains some of the very roads they will follow, some of the very dreams they will experience as signs and portents.

The Web does not depend for its existence on any computer technology. Word-of-mouth, mail, the marginal zine network, 'phone trees', and the like, already suffice to construct an information webwork. The key is not the brand or level of tech involved, but the openness and horizontality of the structure. Nevertheless, the whole concept of the Net implies the use of computers. In the SciFi imagination the Net is headed for the condition of Cyberspace (as in *Tron* or *Neuromancer*) and the pseudo-telepathy of 'virtual reality'. As a Cyberpunk fan I can't help but envision 'reality hacking' playing a major role in the creation of TAZs. Like Gibson and Sterling I am assuming that the official Net will never succeed in shutting down the Web or the counter-Net, that data-piracy, unauthorized transmissions and the free flow of information can never be frozen. (In fact, as I understand it, chaos theory predicts that any universal Control-system is impossible.)

However, leaving aside all mere speculation about the future, we must face a very serious question about the Web and the tech it involves. The TAZ desires above all to avoid mediation, to experience its existence as immediate. The very essence of the affair is 'breast-to-breast' as the Sufis say, or face-to-face. But, BUT: the very essence of the Web is mediation. Machines here are our ambassadors - the flesh is irrelevant except as a terminal, with all the sinister connotations of the term.

The TAZ may perhaps best find its own space by wrapping its head around two seemingly contradictory attitudes toward Hi-Tech and its apotheosis the Net: (1) what we might call the Fifth Estate/Neo-Paleolithic Post-Situ Ultra-Green position, which construes itself as a Luddite argument against mediation and against the Net; and (2) the Cyberpunk utopianists, futuro-libertarians, Reality Hackers and their allies who see the Net as a step forward in evolution, and who assume that any possible ill effects of mediation can be overcome--at least, once we've liberated the means of production.

The TAZ agrees with the hackers because it wants to come into being - in part - through the Net, even through the mediation of the Net. But it also agrees with the greens because it retains intense awareness of itself as body and feels only revulsion for CyberGnosis, the attempt to transcend the body through instantaneity and simulation. The TAZ tends to view

the Tech/anti-Tech dichotomy as misleading, like most dichotomies, in which apparent opposites turn out to be falsifications or even hallucinations caused by semantics. This is a way of saying that the TAZ wants to live in this world, not in the idea of another world, some visionary world born of false unification (all green OR all metal) which can only be more pie in the sky by-&-by (or as Alice put it, "Jam yesterday or jam tomorrow, but never jam today").

The TAZ is 'utopian' in the sense that it envisions an intensification of everyday life, or as the Surrealists might have said, life's penetration by the Marvellous. But it cannot be utopian in the actual meaning of the word, nowhere, or NoPlace Place. The TAZ is somewhere. It lies at the intersection of many forces, like some pagan power-spot at the junction of mysterious ley-lines, visible to the adept in seemingly unrelated bits of terrain, landscape, flows of air, water, animals. But now the lines are not all etched in time and space. Some of them exist only 'within' the Web, even though they also intersect with real times and places. Perhaps some of the lines are 'non-ordinary' in the sense that no convention for quantifying them exists. These lines might better be studied in the light of chaos science than of sociology, statistics, economics, etc. The patterns of force which bring the TAZ into being have something in common with those chaotic 'Strange Attractors' which exist, so to speak, between the dimensions.

The TAZ by its very nature seizes every available means to realize itself - it will come to life whether in a cave or an L-5 Space City - but above all it will live, now, or as soon as possible, in however suspect or ramshackle a form, spontaneously, without regard for ideology or even anti-ideology. It will use the computer because the computer exists, but it will also use powers which are so completely unrelated to alienation or simulation that they guarantee a certain psychic paleolithism to the TAZ, a primordial-shamanic spirit which will 'infect' even the Net itself (the true meaning of Cyberpunk as I read it). Because the TAZ is an intensification, a surplus, an excess, a potlatch, life spending itself in living rather than merely surviving (that snivelling shibboleth of the eighties), it cannot be defined either by Tech or anti-Tech. It contradicts itself like a true despiser of hobgoblins, because it wills itself to be, at any cost in damage to 'perfection', to the immobility of the final.

In the Mandelbrot Set and its computer-graphic realization we watch - in a fractal universe - maps that are embedded and in fact hidden within maps within maps etc. to the limits of computational power. What is it for, this map, which in a sense bears a 1:1 relation with a fractal dimension? What can one do with it, other than admire its psychedelic elegance?

If we were to imagine an information map - a cartographic projection of the Net in its entirety - we would have to include in it the features of chaos, which have already begun to appear, for example, in the operations of complex parallel processing, telecommunications, transfers of electronic 'money', viruses, guerrilla hacking and so on.

Each of these 'areas' of chaos could be represented by topographs similar to the Mandelbrot Set, such that the 'peninsulas' are embedded or hidden within the map - such that they seem to 'disappear'. This 'writing' - parts of which vanish, parts of which efface themselves - represents the very process by which the Net is already compromised, incomplete to its own view, ultimately un-controllable. In other words, the M Set, or something like it, might prove to be useful in 'plotting' (in all senses of the word) the emergence of the counterNet as a chaotic process, a 'creative evolution' in Prigogine's term. If nothing else

the M Set serves as a metaphor for a 'mapping' of the TAZ's interface with the Net as a disappearance of information. Every 'catastrophe' in the Net is a node of power for the Web, the counter-Net. The Net will be damaged by chaos, while the Web may thrive on it.

Whether through simple data-piracy, or else by a more complex development of actual rapport with chaos, the Web-hacker, the cybernetician of the TAZ, will find ways to take advantage of perturbations, crashes, and breakdowns in the Net (ways to make information out of 'entropy'). As a *bricoleur*, a scavenger of information shards, smuggler, blackmailer, perhaps even cyberterrorist, the TAZ-hacker will work for the evolution of clandestine fractal connections. These connections, and the different information that flows among and between them, will form 'power outlets' for the coming-into-being of the TAZ itself - as if one were to steal electricity from the energy-monopoly to light an abandoned house for squatters.

Thus the Web, in order to produce situations conducive to the TAZ, will parasitise the Net - but we can also conceive of this strategy as an attempt to build toward the construction of an alternative and autonomous Net, 'free' and no longer parasitic, which will serve as the basis for a 'new society emerging from the shell of the old'. The counter-Net and the TAZ can be considered, practically speaking, as ends in themselves - but theoretically they can also be viewed as forms of struggle toward a different reality.

Having said this we must still admit to some qualms about computers, some still unanswered questions, especially about the Personal Computer.

The story of computer networks, BBSs and various other experiments in electro-democracy has so far been one of hobbyism for the most part. Many anarchists and libertarians have deep faith in the PC as a weapon of liberation and self-liberation - but no real gains to show, no palpable liberty.

I have little interest in some hypothetical emergent entrepreneurial class of self-employed data/word processors who will soon be able to carry on a vast cottage industry or piecemeal shitwork for various corporations and bureaucracies. Moreover it takes no ESP to foresee that this 'class' will develop its underclass - a sort of lumpen yuppariat: housewives, for example, who will provide their families with 'second incomes' by turning their own homes into electro-sweatshops, little Work-tyrannies where the 'boss' is a computer network.

Also I am not impressed by the sort of information and services proffered by contemporary 'radical' networks. Somewhere - one is told - there exists an 'information economy'. Maybe so; but the info being traded over the 'alternative' BBSs seems to consist entirely of chitchat and techie-talk. Is this an economy? Or merely a pastime for enthusiasts? OK, PCs have created yet another 'print revolution'; OK, marginal webworks are evolving; OK, I can now carry on six phone conversations at once. But what difference has this made in my ordinary life?

Frankly, I already had plenty of data to enrich my perceptions, what with books, movies, TV, theatre, telephones, the U.S. Postal Service, altered states of consciousness, and so on. Do I really need a PC in order to obtain yet more such data? You offer me secret information? Well...perhaps I'm tempted - but still I demand marvellous secrets, not just unlisted telephone numbers or the trivia of cops and politicians. Most of all I want computers to provide me with information linked to real goods - "the good things in life," as the

IWW Preamble puts it. And here, since I'm accusing the hackers and BBSers of irritating intellectual vagueness, I must myself descend from the baroque clouds of Theory & Critique and explain what I mean by 'real goods'.

Let's say that for both political and personal reasons I desire good food, better than I can obtain from Capitalism - unpolluted food still blessed with strong and natural flavours. To complicate the game, imagine that the food I crave is illegal - raw milk perhaps, or the exquisite Cuban fruit *mamey*, which cannot be imported fresh into the U.S. because its seed is hallucinogenic (or so I'm told). I am not a farmer. Let's pretend I'm an importer of rare perfumes and aphrodisiacs, and sharpen the play by assuming most of my stock is also illegal. Or maybe I only want to trade word processing services for organic turnips, but refuse to report the transaction to the IRS (as required by law, believe it or not). Or maybe I want to meet other humans for consensual but illegal acts of mutual pleasure (this has actually been tried, but all the hard-sex BBSs have been busted - and what use is an underground with lousy security?). In short, assume that I'm fed up with mere information, the ghost in the machine. According to you, computers should already be quite capable of facilitating my desires for food, drugs, sex, tax evasion. So what's the matter? Why isn't it happening?

The TAZ has occurred, is occurring, and will occur with or without the computer. But for the TAZ to reach its full potential it must become less a matter of spontaneous combustion and more a matter of 'islands in the Net'. The Net, or rather the counter-Net, assumes the promise of an integral aspect of the TAZ, an addition that will multiply its potential, a 'quantum jump' (odd how this expression has come to mean a big leap) in complexity and significance. The TAZ must now exist within a world of pure space, the world of the senses. Liminal, even evanescent, the TAZ must combine information and desire in order to fulfil its adventure (its 'happening'), in order to fill itself to the borders of its destiny, to saturate itself with its own becoming.

Perhaps the Neo-Paleolithic School are correct when they assert that all forms of alienation and mediation must be destroyed or abandoned before our goals can be realized-or perhaps true anarchy will be realized only in Outer Space, as some futuro-libertarians assert. But the TAZ does not concern itself very much with 'was' or 'will be'. The TAZ is interested in results, successful raids on consensus reality, breakthroughs into more intense and more abundant life. If the computer cannot be used in this project, then the computer will have to be overcome. My intuition however suggests that the counter-Net is already coming into being, perhaps already exists - but I cannot prove it. I've based the theory of the TAZ in large part on this intuition. Of course the Web also involves non-computerized networks of exchange such as samizdat, the black market, etc. - but the full potential of non-hierarchic information networking logically leads to the computer as the tool par excellence. Now I'm waiting for the hackers to prove I'm right, that my intuition is valid. Where are my turnips?