



# An impossible future: John Perry Barlow's 'Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace'

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## Abstract

John Perry Barlow's 'Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace' narrates a world in which revolutionary politics are assumed to be immanent in the machines that structure and enable networked communication. Attention to the rhetorical strategies of the piece reveals a wealth of contradictions and misdirection: newness is rooted in history; revolution is effected by commercial transaction; and liberal democracy becomes libertarianism. The ways in which the Declaration establishes and resolves narrative conflict promote an 'impossible future' that is blind both to the history of the underlying technologies and to the American revolutionary politics on which it claims to base itself. Barlow's project would have been served better by a more pragmatic intervention into real-world processes. Ten years after its original publication, the Declaration is both widely reprinted and increasingly mocked: its language has become commonplace and its idealism has come to seem absurd.

## Key words

cyberspace • digital democracy • Electronic Frontier Foundation  
• John Perry Barlow • subjectivity

Rather than make up an impossible future in which technology does all the political work that properly – and presently – is the province of human beings, we should dismantle utopic scenarios surrounding technology to reveal the deep ambivalence, contradictions and confluences within them. (Sobchack, 1996: 88)

John Perry Barlow's 'Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace' (1996) is one document among many that attempts at once to define and delimit the arena of electronic interaction, commerce and information popularly designated as 'cyberspace'. In so doing, the text constructs precisely that style of utopia that Sobchack urges us to dismantle, a world that is, in Barlow's words, 'everywhere and nowhere' (1996: 366), a world in which revolutionary politics are assumed to be immanent in the machines that structure and enable it. The 'utopic scenario' on offer in the declaration is literary in nature, but political in aspiration. Barlow writes, 'We are forming our own Social Contract because [o]ur world is different' (1996: 366), but is it different? Attention to the rhetorical strategies of the piece – its slippery pronouns and complex structure of allusions and metaphors – reveals a wealth of contradictions and misdirection: newness is rooted in history; revolution is effected by commercial transaction; and liberal democracy becomes libertarianism.

Specific textual criticism of the declaration here undergirds a broader political analysis that is both appropriate and necessary. The author of the declaration, John Perry Barlow, is a prominent figure in cyberpolitics. According to journalist and researcher Paulina Borsook, he is 'perhaps the most high-profile member of the digerati on the planet' (2000: 130). In the mid-1990s, she adds, 'Barlow was the Playboy Philosopher for the *Wired* generation' (2000: 131). In autumn 2004, *Reason Online* offered a feature interview with Barlow, in which the very title names him 'The Thomas Jefferson of cyberspace', calling his declaration 'the doc forwarded around the world' (Doherty, 2004). According to Barlow (nd) himself, the declaration is referenced by no fewer than 20,000 websites.<sup>1</sup> He also notes that in 1999, *Future Banker* magazine named him as one of the '25 Most Influential People in Financial Services', despite his amateur status in that field. While Barlow is by no means the only party interested in constructing new social realities in the contested space of cyberspace, he has been one of that space's most prominent boosters, someone whose writings receive ready publicity and wide dissemination. More than 10 years later, the declaration continues to be referenced in popular journalism and on personal websites as an important political and ontological document. Ultimately, the failure of this text to achieve the difference that it aims at shows that one cannot simply will a new 'social contract' into being through force of personality or rhetoric; instead, the true legacy of the declaration has been to depoliticize its addressees,

encouraging them to abandon concrete political action in favour of a less effective politics of identity. Accordingly, this article traces the rhetorical strategies by which Barlow undermines his own purported aim, and by which the declaration emblemizes a larger Silicon Valley politics of technolibertarianism.

### CYBERSPACE IS, OR IS LIKE...

By 1996, 'cyberspace' had become a privileged locus of debate over the new realities of an increasingly global, technologized culture, giving rise to a chorus of futurism and prognostication in which Barlow's voice rang loudly. The globalized world had come to be synonymous for many with the information society or the knowledge economy, and cyberspace the emblem of both. Thus Daniel Drezner (2004: 481) draws a firm link between the popular discourses of globalization and of the internet. He identifies 'a strong, coherent, epistemic community' of elite 'netizens' such as Barlow and Nicholas Negroponte, as well as academic commentators, subscribing to two fundamental tenets, of which neither are empirically proven or politically tenable. The first tenet is that 'globalization undercuts state sovereignty'; the second, that the power of non-state actors such as multinational corporations and technical experts to determine global politics is growing (Drezner, 2004). Thus Barlow can find a ready and responsive audience when he claims:

We have no elected government, nor are we likely to have one ... You have no moral right to rule us nor do you possess any methods of enforcement we have true reason to fear. (1996: 365)

Everyone agrees, and everyone, according to Drezner's analysis, is wrong. Similarly, Darin Barney (2000) doubts the proclaimed ungovernability of cyberspace. He wonders: if the internet is in fact as inherently liberatory and ungovernable as the netizens of Barlow's stripe so vociferously claim, why do these self-styled freedom-fighters feel the need to keep telling government to keep away (Barney, 2000)? Nevertheless, the popular consensus remains: Barney suggests that it is by constantly repeating that the internet is ungovernable that this assertion comes to seem true, a peculiar rhetorical alchemy that turns copper and fibre-optic wires into political gold. Any universalizing proclamation about the essential character and 'truths' of this 'space', then, must be read with an eye to the way in which it performs itself and its subjects into being, and the real-world repercussions of this formation.

In that the declaration claims to articulate a new and radical politics, it is essentially a performative document. It asserts and enacts systems of meaning that ultimately legitimize certain identities, behaviours and realities at the expense of others. The manifesto is a natural format for this type of proclamation, and Barlow's brief text recalls the long tradition of similar

political and ideological declarations that litter political history. By definition, these documents are formal and sometimes legally binding statements of particular truths, especially political truths: indeed, the word 'manifesto', has roots in the Latin *manifestus*, meaning 'clear' or 'evident'. In 'making clear' the outlines of a particular political question or belief, the manifesto and declaration take part in the determination of the very essence and bounds of their subject. That these 'essences' and 'bounds' are not natural but constructed, is indicated by the constant and contested assertions and reassertions demonstrated in the proliferation of the documents that describe them. Barlow's declaration participates in a kind of rhetorical bootstrapping, in that its assertions of a particular reality constitute one of the acts that generate that reality. It is an ontological statement. Writing somewhat grandly in the third person on his own website, Barlow (nd) claims that 'in 1990, he first applied William Gibson's science fiction term cyberspace to the already-existing global electronic social space now generally referred to by that name'. Further, the site suggests that 'until his naming it, it had not been considered any sort of place'.<sup>2</sup> Whether Barlow's act of christening can be verified or not, this claim reminds us that what we have come to know as 'cyberspace' is not self-evident: it must be narrated. Arguably, the declaration, like its generic kin, makes as much as it describes its constituency and subject, and as the reference to naming reminds us, it does so largely through language.

Thus the manifesto functions in regard to a certain social space in much the same way that Judith Butler (1993) reads the citationality and performativity of identity as constitutive of the coherent social subject. Butler proposes the concepts of materialization, performativity and citation to explain the process of subject formation. She argues that construction of the recognizable sexed and gendered body is 'a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effects of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter' (Butler, 1993: 9). Further, this process 'will be a kind of citationality, the acquisition of being through the citing of power' (1993: 15). Power, in this case, is the already-establishedness of the cited structure – it is the external-to-self that makes up a self subsequently represented as wholly self-determining. Rosanne Allucquère Stone offers the similar notion of 'materialized discursivity' (1995: 39) to describe both this process and its effect: subjects are materialized and legitimized through a proliferation of documents that root them in specific places, times and identities. Stone writes particularly of the construction of what she calls the 'fiduciary subject' (1995: 40) through such documents as birth certificates, phone book listings, bank cards and the like: textual evidence grants material facticity. This notion of materialized discursivity is especially apt to a reading of the declaration, considering the nature of Barlow's task: issues of boundary, fixity and surface are anything but apparent and established in cyberspace at the time of its

writing, and as such they demand constant rhetorical policing. Indeed, despite the awesome bulk of critical and popular treatises on the nature, politics, and ethics of cyberspace, anthropologists and social scientists question whether a self-sufficient cyberspace can be demonstrated even to exist in an objective, quantifiable fashion (Escobar, 1996; Hakken, 1999).<sup>3</sup> Cyberspace is largely an imagined space, an artifact built from narrative. Sally Wyatt, investigating metaphorical descriptions of the internet, notes that 'the future has to be discussed in terms of the imaginary ... sometimes today's imaginary becomes tomorrow's lived reality' (2004: 257).

Barlow's declaration aims specifically to fix a particular kind of cyberspace in the wider imaginary, and he employs metaphor to do so. On offer in the declaration are battles between mind and body, parent and child, government and citizen, freedom and censorship, hygiene and infection and 'pig iron' and ideas. Barney (2000) likens the power of popular conceptions of networked computing technologies to the Promethean myth. He describes the popular characterization of these technologies as 'the story of Prometheus's people writ large: the story of humanity blindly wielding instruments to command and transcend that which is given, in the hope of creating its own future' (2000: 6). Like Stone, Barney advocates apprehending the politics of network technologies via more literary practices: while these politics may be a matter of material practices, 'the political rhetoric of those amazed' by network technologies offers 'a convenient starting point for the journey toward discovering' the implication and direction of these practices (Barney, 2000: 24). Thomas and Wyatt identify the most common images deployed: 'Highways, railroads, webs, frontiers, tidal waves, matrices, libraries, shopping malls, village squares and town halls all appear in discussions of the internet' (1999: 695). Barlow uses all of these metaphors, often at the same time. Consider the following sentence: 'you are trying to ward off the virus of liberty by erecting guard posts at the frontiers of cyberspace' (1996: 366). Martial and medical metaphors predominate, but the Wild West myth of American settlement appears as well.

While the metaphors in the declaration may be mixed and numerous, the battles are sweeping and the combatants heroic; the sentences are essentially meaningless but the prose is bracing. Borsook (2000) suggests that such inflated rhetoric is part of the appeal of internet technologies, and that hyperbole is a defining characteristic of writings about cyberspace particularly. She names Barlow as one of the chief exponents of this emerging heroic mode of cyber-narrative, in whose writings and speeches 'for the first time the natural progress in microelectronics was touted as *epic*' (Borsook, 2000: 133; emphasis in original). True to this emerging epic form, the declaration appeals to emotion in a style more appropriate to jingoism than to thoughtful reflection on governance.

Borsook summarizes Barlow's general political mode thus: 'His rhetoric is call-and-response for the Dionysian technolibertarian cult, as opposed to the Apollonic' (2000: 152).<sup>4</sup> The declaration offers a particularly compelling narrative that constructs a version of reality. As Stone asks: 'What kind of world are these folks bringing into being? Or, perhaps ... what kind of system is using them to become realized?' (1995: 31). The declaration hopes to found a new 'civilization of the Mind in cyberspace' that will 'be more humane and fair than the world your governments have made before' (Barlow, 1996: 367). However, the ways in which it establishes and resolves narrative conflict – through the use of literary techniques such as metaphor, allusion, and direct address – instead promote an 'impossible future' that is blind both to the history of its underlying technologies and to the politics on which it claims to base itself. Language may shift our view of the world, but a popular consensus on vocabulary and metaphor does not necessarily alter the material operation of that world: tucking a flower into a gun barrel creates a powerful visual symbol, but does not preclude the florist being shot. Nevertheless, as Wyatt notes: 'Metaphors may convey something about the future functions and technological configurations of the internet, and they may also reveal the political assumptions and aspirations of those who deploy them' (2004: 244).

## HISTORY REPEATING ITSELF: VARIATION ON A THEME

The assertion of newness and revolution is supported in the declaration by selective appropriation of American political history through charged metaphors and allusions. Most obviously, Barlow cites the American revolutionary political tradition to lend authority, fervor and dignity to his project. The title of his text recalls the United States Declaration of Independence of 1776, a document trailing with it more than two centuries of accumulated social meaning: this is quite a powerful law (in the Butlerian sense) to invoke, and it sets a decidedly righteous, anti-colonialist, Boston Tea Party tone to the piece. Even more explicitly, Barlow's text accuses the systems of government that he takes as his addressee of

increasingly hostile and colonial measures [which] place us in the same position as those previous lovers of freedom and self-determination who had to reject the authorities of distant, uninformed powers. (1996: 367)

Barlow is at his most controlled here: the colonial metaphor is consistent and its associations clear. However, it is a metaphor, an allusion to the founding myth of the American republic that draws rhetorical links without grounding them in clear parallels to the situation at hand: what hostile and colonial measures, and how to reject which uninformed powers?

Barlow's citation of the Declaration of Independence is not entirely straightforward. In appropriating the tone of the original document, the declaration dissimulates its own politics, the 'conventions of which it is a repetition' (Butler, 1993: 12). The 1776 Declaration asserted the sovereignty of the governments of the 13 States of the Union to pass laws in their own interest; in one sense, the purpose of the American revolution was as much to assert the right to govern as it was a revolt against unjust government. Indeed, the very first injustice of which the American statesmen accuse their king is this: 'He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good' (reprinted in Kindig, nd) By contrast, Barlow's declaration chafes against the constraints of any national law while explicitly riding the (rhetorical and) political coat-tails of the American revolution. The declaration is not alone in occupying this contradictory position. Sobchack (1996) traces the doubled etymology of the word 'franchise' and its function within a variously understood political system called 'democracy' in the USA. She argues that since about 1819, American laws covering the rights of individual citizens to untrammelled self-expression and self-interest have been extended so far as to cover the rights of individual corporations to pursue unfettered profit in a form of corporate self-interest.<sup>5</sup> We see this dual meaning in Barlow's definition of cyberspace, which 'consists of *transactions*, relationships, and thought itself' (1996: 366; emphasis added). 'Government' is a dirty word in Barlow's textual utopia; he envisions social order of a more haphazard sort. 'We believe that from ethics, enlightened self-interest, and the commonweal, our governance will emerge' (1996: 366), he writes, without noting that the commonweal and self-interest (corporate or personal) are often at odds.

Barlow's so-called revolution, ostensibly taking place in a brand new social space and enacted in new kinds of identities and social relations at the time of its writing in 1996, actually relies on established and particularly American (as opposed to global or geographically transcendent) ideologies of democracy-as-freest-markets, and the rights of the individual above all. Sobchack (1996) notes the ultimately conservative rather than revolutionary character of a market-based conceptualization of franchise and democracy. She describes the resulting conception of democracy as 'dialectically grounded in contradiction and potential inequality' (Sobchack, 1996: 80). Considering the radical possibilities of an emerging "'democratic" electronic culture', Sobchack cautions: 'Self-contradictory, it will be *both more and less* (not *either more or less*) liberating, participatory and interactive than was the case with previous ... cultural forms' (1996: 80; emphasis in original). While not necessarily dismissive of the progressive potential of a new, democratic electronic culture, Sobchack warns that the establishment of such a democracy will require precisely the same kinds of intervention and activism which have proven so difficult to effect in our current political systems. The equivocal and

paradoxical space in which Sobchack places emerging electronic cultures is the inverse of the political terrain that the declaration claims to inhabit; indeed, it is the very field of battle that Barlow encourages his readers to 'take our leave of'.

## **SIMULATION OF CRISIS**

This paradox is glossed over in the declaration by a simulation of crisis enacted in a series of binary oppositions that structure the narrative. Jean Baudrillard (2001) proposes the term 'simulation of crisis' to describe the masking of the eternal progress of the culture of the simulacrum by the reconfiguration of sameness as polarized conflict. Baudrillard offers the example of Watergate, a scandal in which the methods of committing and detecting crime (wire-tapping and surveillance) are identical; recognition of this sameness, however, is elided in a rush of moralizing sentiment that heroizes one set of seekers-after-information (the journalists and whistleblower) and demonizes another (Republican Party wire-tappers). Baudrillard writes: 'it is by the simulation of a conventional, restricted perspective field, where the premises and consequences of any act or event are calculable, that a political credibility can be maintained' (2001: 174). The first such conventional and restricted simulation is described in the opening sentence of the declaration:

Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. (Barlow, 1996: 365)

The simulated crisis is set up in a rhetorical sleight of hand that identifies the narrating 'I' with 'the future', while the weary and antagonistic past is unnecessarily limiting, the subject of address ('you') at which the complaint is directed. Change is rooted in individual action, first-person singular versus second-person monolithic. In the American political tradition, this is an especially conventional narrative, particularly in the allusive context of the 1776 Declaration of Independence: identification and point of view are clear.

Barlow's rhetorical practice of constructing clear binaries with obvious negative and positive associations disguises the fact, among others, that the individualist future narrated by the declaration is built on a public works past. Even the most cursory review of the invention, development and spread of the internet technologies on which Barlow bases his 'cyberspace' reveals a blend of public and private interests, civilian and military funds, popular and commercial uses. Thomas and Wyatt (1999) identify four distinct cultural epochs in the history of networked computing technologies; only the final epoch, that of the commercialized internet, dating from about 1991, resembles the world that Barlow describes as natural and self-evident. The

internet's three other epochs are highly institutionalized: first, a 'scientists' playground' dedicated to hardware and standards development, funded by military research spending; second, a 'clubby' set of technologies employed by computing researchers and their students to communicate professionally and personally; and third, an intellectual and communications resource serving a more broadly defined academic community, supported by large institutional computing resources and campus-to-campus interconnectivity (Thomas and Wyatt, 1999). The home of 'Mind' invoked by Barlow is predicated in a very real and material way on the interests (both intellectual and financial) of the so-called weary giants of flesh and steel.

Despite this history, the conflict simulated in the declaration is built from the prevalent but nonetheless unfounded belief that internet technologies are essentially populist tools of individual empowerment, unfairly meddled with by unwieldy and corrupt systems of government. This is the substance of the 'strong, coherent, epistemic community' that Drezner (2001) identifies in debates on global governance of the internet. Reviewing the rhetorical strategies of various public movements on the internet, Lincoln Dahlberg (2001) categorizes three main orientations to the question of digital democracy: liberal-individualist, communitarian and deliberative. Along with much of his other writing, Barlow's declaration maps neatly onto the liberal-individualist ideology, in which 'citizenship becomes less a collective, political activity than an individual, economic activity – the right to pursue one's interests, without hindrance, in the marketplace' (Dahlberg, 2001: 160). With its emphasis on individual freedoms and its conflation of these freedoms with unrestricted economic activity, the liberal-individualist position adopts as its fundamental tenet the contradictory position that Sobchack (1996) reads as endemic to mainstream American democracy more broadly. Thus Dahlberg (2001) notes the prevalence of the liberal-individualist ideology across the political spectrum: Barlow is a notable proponent of it, but he shares this view with prominent American conservatives such as Ross Perot and Newt Gingrich. Further, liberal-individualist orientations to the internet also suffuse Clinton-era government initiatives via the notion of access to information and active citizenry (Dahlberg, 2001). The *cri de coeur* offered by the declaration could not be more conventional: its view is shared by those against whom Barlow explicitly directs his anger.

To suggest that cyberspace as described in the declaration is anything other than an idealized but otherwise easily recognizable online version of liberal individualism requires a certain rhetorical violence, evidenced in the text by the wild proliferation of loaded metaphors and some tricky pronoun usage. The denigrated term of Barlow's opening proclamation, the 'you' denounced by the speaking 'I', is a structure of government rhetorically allied to an outmoded materiality and corporeality. This

unsavoury addressee is opposed to the 'I' – note how this 'I' slides into speaking for an unexplained and unintroduced 'us' – who is an apparent spokesperson for a community of disembodied 'Mind' which represents the utopian future of pure consciousness. The anachronism that paints industry as dim-witted and too bogged down in 19th-century modes of production to participate in the new virtual life is at least as dangerous as it is disingenuous. This characterization disguises the fact that the 'you' of address – for the moment, we can rename it 'late global capital' rather than 'weary giants of flesh and steel' – actually wields a great deal of power, and manifests values largely aligned with those of the 'we' who is ostensibly so oppositional.<sup>6</sup>

Examining the 'divine irrelevance of images', Baudrillard (2001) distinguishes between simulation and dissimulation: the second term connotes a feigning, a pretending, while the first involves the active construction of the real. We can see both modes at work in the declaration. Barlow's construction of historically loaded conflicts simulates a crisis between epic combatants, which dissimulates the sameness of the order he proposes to the one he decries. By framing the declaration in polarized constructions that pit 'flesh and steel' against 'Mind', Barlow rigs the terms of the cyberspace debate such that what can be described quite reasonably as the logical progress of late capital – the globalization of capital and concomitant liberalization of trade which attends the computerization of industry and commerce – is recharacterized as a deadly battle between a utopian future and an outmoded past, between 'us' and 'them'. Even from within the culture of internet users, this rhetorical strategy misses the point, failing to capture and address the quite real tension attending the rapid commercialization of the internet: a transition from a low-penetration, text-based networking protocol with strong communitarian practices to a graphical mainstream entertainment medium that was coming to seem mean-spirited and overly profit-minded to its earliest users (Thomas and Wyatt, 1999). Absent also is any explicit consideration of the areas of concern repeatedly referenced in academic and popular writings: privacy, intellectual property, censorship, encryption, regulation and a reconsideration of the 'public sphere' (see Drezner, 2004; Papacharissi, 2002; Sassen, 2000; Thomas and Wyatt, 1999).

The project of ensuring the 'democracy' and 'freedom' of the space contested in the declaration is disserved by the construction of a chimeral 'you' to blame everything on, and by a failure to address the very real power differentials between the little guy with the modem and the media conglomerates – not big government – that seek to restrict or profit from his online adventures. Barney notes that 'the ownership of network technology is resolutely capitalist in character; it is private; it is only moderately regulated; and it is acquisitive, accumulative, and commercial' (2000: 8). As for the power

that internet technologies actually give the 'little guy', Barney points out that 'networks might provide those who use them with an interesting and potentially significant political tool; they do not alter the users' class position' (2000: 109). James Kinney concurs, noting somewhat mildly that the 'power of virtual mobility is not quite the same as the power of accumulated capital' (1996: 145). In this way, we can read the declaration, with its transaction-based politics and vehement denouncing of regulation, as the complaint of the moneyed against the powerful, hardly the 'Everyman' narrative that the text promotes itself to be.

The breach is papered over through choice of metaphor: in particular, through the ascription to the weary giants of an engineering function and the netizens of an evolutionary model. Thomas and Wyatt (1999) note, by 1999, the predominance among high-profile 'digerati' of what they call 'evolutionary' metaphors, a narrative claiming that the technology itself will evolve organically. While initially this might seem to be a counterintuitive model to settle on (natural technology? evolving computers?), Wyatt (2004) reminds us that this kind of popular Darwinism undergirds classical economics and the model we have come to know as *laissez-faire* capitalism. This formulation resonates particularly among the readers and writers of *Wired*. In her reading of metaphor in that publication, Wyatt (2004) examines Virginia Postrel's self-conscious reflection on the power of figurative language.<sup>7</sup> In 'Technocracy R.I.P.', Postrel (1998) divides North-American culture into 'stasists' and 'dynamists' – the former tend to use engineering metaphors to control and manage technology, while the latter adopt a more evolutionary discourse of change and adaptation. For Postrel, these metaphors are both revelatory and consequential. She sees in the Clinton/Gore administration, for example, a lamentable impulse to engineering metaphors, particularly in its campaign promise to 'build a bridge to the future' (Postrel, 1998). For Postrel, such a vision 'represents technocracy, the rule of experts' who believe 'the future must be brought under control, managed, and planned' (Postrel, 1998). She chafes at the restriction implicit in the metaphor: a bridge 'must be predictable and uniform: We will go from point A to point B with no deviations' (Postrel, 1998). The rigidly engineered future offered by 'technocrats' (in Barlow's terms, the weary giants of flesh and steel) is opposed by an ethic of 'dynamism'. Dynamists 'share beliefs in spontaneous order, in evolved solutions, in the limits of centralized knowledge, in the possibility of progress' (Postrel, 1998). *A priori* individualists, dynamists (unlike engineer technocrats) rarely cohere into a group – not, that is, until the advent of cyberspace in the Barlovian vein. Postrel (1998) suggests that '[p]rotecting cyberspace could become the catalysing issue for a broader dynamist coalition', promoting evolutionary models of technology and liberal-individualist orientations to

economics. She sees new venues for a new populist movement, coalescing around

not just the internet, or free trade, or the 'new economy,' but a world of richness and variety where people are free to experiment and learn, to challenge themselves and each other, to cherish the wisdom of the past and create the wisdom of the future. (Postrel, 1998)

Barlow is as self-consciously attuned to the power of rhetoric as Postrel. In 1990, writing to the Association for Computing Machinery, he explicitly identified a narrative lack as a central problem in cyberspace:

For all its importance to modern existence, cyberspace remains a frontier region, across which roam the few aboriginal technologists and cyberpunks who can tolerate the austerity of its savage computer interfaces, incompatible communications protocols, proprietary barricades, cultural and legal ambiguities, and *general lack of useful maps or metaphors*. (Barlow, 1991; emphasis added)

Certainly, the redress of this lack has been one of Barlow's key contributions: this short passage alone mixes colonial, postmodern, technical, legal and geographical discourses. Borsook (2000) argues that Barlow's writings exemplify a mindset endemic to Silicon Valley high-tech, naming this brand of ethics 'technolibertarianism'. This belief system, marked by a distrust of government, an 'every entrepreneur for themselves' mindset, and a total reliance on the capacity of the market to sort the wheat from the chaff, is less an explicit politics than a set of self-evident truths in the culture of high-technology, very much rooted in the conflation of democratic politics with free market economics. The declaration consequently promotes a deliberate inactivity (evolutionary model of *laissez-faire* technological development) over deliberative and active politics (engineering, legislation): let the individuals do what they want, and the 'environment' will sort itself out.

As Barlow has it in the declaration, the technology of 'cyberspace' dramatically reconfigures the relationship of power away from institutions and toward individuals. Drezner, however; is clear in his assessment of the continuing might of nation-states: 'Powerful states will use a range of foreign policy substitutes ... to advance their desired preferences into desired outcomes' (2004: 478). Further, despite such claims as John Gilmore's that 'The Net interprets censorship as damage and routes around it' (quoted in Elmer-Dewitt et al., 1995), Drezner finds that, on the contrary, 'unilateral content regulation has succeeded despite the strong normative consensus among internet enthusiasts against such regulation' (2004: 489). Like Gilmore (a colleague of Barlow's in the Electronic Frontier Foundation), the declaration repeatedly rejects regulatory and legislative initiatives to promote instead the essential character of 'cyberspace' in a one-note formulation that

simply refuses to acknowledge that which it would not submit to: government is irrelevant because 'we did not invite you'; legal government requires the consent of the governed (Barlow, 1996: 365); and national law is irrelevant because 'our identities have no bodies ... [and] may be distributed across many of your jurisdictions' (1996: 366). Hand and Sandywell are blunt in their assessment of this strategy:

Where information technologies have been singled out as key causes of progressive change and democratic enlightenment, we not only have an instance of ideological simplification but also an advanced form of technological fetishism. (2002: 198)

### 'THINK DIFFERENT'

More than 10 years after its publication, the declaration is still widely reprinted on the internet. Increasingly, it is mocked. In early 2003, *The Economist* opened an article by quoting Barlow in a mock-nostalgic vein: 'Ah, it all seems so long ago,' writes David Manasian (2003), reminding readers that '[i]t is hard to believe today, but Mr Barlow's musings struck a chord at the time'. The tone of patronising disbelief is miles removed from the broad dissemination of the piece in 1995, and the position of authority and respect accorded to its author. Times, it seems, have changed. The article announces with clear hindsight that Barlow's claims have come to seem 'absurd: just another example of ... 1990s hype' (Manasian, 2003). *The Economist* is not alone in repudiating Barlow's vision of the 'home of Mind'. An April 2004 piece in the *Guardian* sniffs that Barlow's manifesto 'always sounded silly', but that the benefit of a near-decade of experience now makes it seem 'hopelessly naïve' (Schofield, 2004). Writer Jack Schofield counters Barlow's utopianism with worldweary cynicism befitting the post-dot com crash era:

People need to learn ... that the internet is not cybernirvana, or 'the new home of Mind'. It is, rather, the new Utopia for liars and thieves who will happily empty your bank account and who stand almost no chance of getting caught. (Schofield, 2004)

In 2009, it is easy enough to see that online interactivity resembles neither a digital gulag of governmental interference and surveillance, nor an interworked, bodiless utopia free from the constraining influence of history, politics and the other messy materialities of human culture. The highly rhetorical nature of the writing has become apparent in its datedness, and with it the lack of referential content. The injustices Barlow was concerned with – the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the Communications Decency Act of 1996, the classification of encryption technologies as weaponry, thus subject to federal supervision and restriction – were and are outrageous

enough to bear naming and elaboration. To have described what was actually so objectionable about these regulatory initiatives might have suggested a means of seeking redress in the political or public arenas, interventions which might have had concrete effects. As *The Economist* points out: 'The taste for hyperbole of Mr Barlow, Mr Lessig and their sort may be easy to mock' (Manasian, 2003). Engaging in a battle for metaphorical supremacy, rhetorical dominance and passionate personal identification with his idealized vision of the new 'Home of Mind', Barlow moved away from specific coalition-building and lobbying which might have rendered the declaration more effectual in the long run, and less easily dismissed as a silly artifact of a long-gone moment of naive idealism.

For his part, Barlow has become increasingly disenchanted with the failure of his own vision to realize itself. He has lost faith in the political strategies of the declaration era, a strategy he now describes as a 'lifestyle libertarianism' that 'took the view that if you could change consciousness, politics would take care of itself' (quoted in Doherty, 2004). However, by late 2004 Barlow had come to believe that 'we have to re-engage in the political process we have' because its operations are consequential (quoted in Doherty, 2004). In the decade since the declaration lumped government in with established industry as the enemy menacing the individual consumer and e-entrepreneur, Barlow has witnessed the increasing tendency toward a monopoly economy and a form of government that extends the rights of corporations while restricting the rights and limiting the choices of individual citizens, particularly through the tightening of copyright and intellectual property laws, and the loosening of consumer protection and anti-trust regulations. In our own age of corporate internet service provider traffic 'shaping', and top-secret USA government national security letters demanding data from the Internet Archive, Barlow's utopian dream remains unrealized.<sup>8</sup>

In the contemporary era, lifestyle libertarianism increasingly gives way to more pragmatic interventions into digital culture. The work of the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), developed by Barlow and Lotus founder Mitch Kapor to undertake specific legal challenges to perceived infringements of personal liberty, models the kind of success possible when flamboyant narrative is linked to concrete action. Despite a tendency to Barlovian rhetoric in its mission statement – 'If America's founding fathers had anticipated the digital frontier, there would be a clause in the Constitution protecting your rights online, as well' (Electronic Frontier Foundation, 2007) – the EFF operates at the level of pragmatic intervention. Its recent cases include a defense of peer-to-peer filesharing technologies, in which it makes its case not on calls to the unstoppable evolutionary character of high-technology, but rather by reference to legal precedent and specific legislative protections. Similarly, it has undertaken challenges to

overly-restrictive intellectual property rulings, as well as of some of the information-gathering provisions of the USA Patriot Act of 2001. EFF lawyers may believe in technological essentialism – they confidently assert that ‘being able to share ideas and information is the reason the Web was created in the first place’ – but they act to protect these rights, as they say, ‘in the trenches’ (Electronic Frontier Foundation, 2007). This trench warfare, as the EFF describes its work, is necessarily bound up in material specificities, embroiled in the ‘both/and’ of Sobchack’s (1996) electronic democracy, the messy conflicts of interests and shifting balance of consumers and citizens, corporations and governments.

Barlow’s piece and others like it promoted self-congratulatory and heroic poses that allowed the adherents of the *Wired* philosophy to see themselves as intrinsic revolutionaries. It is easy enough to see the appeal of such a position; it is far less taxing to don a pair of cyberpunk sunglasses and gesticulate insultingly to The Powers That Be than it is to put on a suit, prepare to compromise and lobby for a position at the legislative table. Barlow’s coupling of the language of revolution with the politics of the status quo is not unique, but it is not without consequence. Ultimately, the tragic flaw of the declaration is not the nature of the ‘cyberspace’ that Barlow’s text constructed as self-evident, although we have seen its intrinsic failures. Rather, it is in the way that it distracted passionate, fundamentally decent people from taking meaningful and substantive action by proposing lifestyle libertarianism as a viable political strategy. For Wyatt, texts such as the declaration articulate a harmful universalism: ‘presenting technology as the asocial mechanism for emancipation removes people from the historical process of change’ (2004: 253). Indeed, as we have seen, the symbolic order proposed in the declaration chips away at the idea of functional, responsible, common government as an effective and desirable means of structuring civil society, and acts as a powerful normative force promoting the liberal-individualist, market-based notion of freedom. In the ‘declaration’, Barlow claims to describe a new, global, (a)political, inclusive cyberspace community; however, this formulation disguised, elided and mischaracterized the forces shaping the development of the world wide web as well as the subjects participating in it. It had the corollary effect of shutting down or misdirecting substantive discussion of such issues as content and infrastructure regulation, global governance, access, privacy and intellectual property rights in a retreat to flamboyant, if sincere, rhetorical chest-beating.<sup>9</sup>

The internet has always been more plural and complex than Barlow makes it out to be, and it is even more so now. The news is full of stories describing the ‘greying’ of Facebook, the use of social networking tools to promote religious belonging, the extension of American internet tools such as Google and Yahoo! into more repressive political regimes, software repurposed such

that its values abroad fly in the face of the values that it promotes domestically (Hollett, 2007; Richtel, 2007; Thomson, 2006). A simple us/them politics is insufficient to address these nuances of use, the various agendas that individuals, groups, organizations and governments bring to this collective space, part-public, part-private. Proposing a strategy of 'lifestyle libertarianism' to create a cyberutopia from what he imagines to be the dystopia of late 20th-century public life, Barlow replicates the error of that century's writers of dystopia: only able to conceptualize a response to what he understands to be systemic injustice, inequity and inefficiency in terms of an individual, identity-based rebellion, Barlow sets up an unwinnable conflict (for an elaboration of this argument, see Ferns, 1999; Ruppert, 1986). As the deeply personal, ultimately failing, rebellions of *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* Winston Smith (Orwell, 1990[1949]) and *Brave New World's* John Savage (Huxley, 1998[1932]) show, systems cannot be overthrown, or even significantly influenced, by dissenting individuals acting on their own. Rhetoric matters: by proposing an individualist cyberspace populated by libertarian cyberpunks, Barlow foreclosed meaningful collaboration among those who might devise and legislate a truly democratic and open internet.

What is required now is a return to the rhetoric of the concrete, a flight from the hyperbole of a brave new futurism which has been coopted so easily into the politics of the status quo, in order to build and maintain the better, more humane cyberspace that Barlow and his followers describe in the declaration. This process entails more strategic alliances, more negotiation and more imbrication in real-world politics than Barlow's heady formulation allows.

## Notes

- 1 Searching the phrase 'declaration of the independence of cyberspace' (with quotation marks) gives 'approximately' 7230 hits. Verification of the first 120 of these offers a 100 percent relevance rate: these sites returned by Google either reprint, reference or restate the declaration.
- 2 Consultation of 21 separate dictionaries – both online and offline, ranging from the *Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, to the *American Heritage Dictionary* to Wikipedia ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)), the *Free Online Dictionary of Computing* and Netlingo ([www.netlingo.com](http://www.netlingo.com)) – sees numerous attributions of the word to William Gibson, several descriptions of network infrastructure, a surprising number of allusions to the 'imaginary' or 'virtual' character of the space, but no mention of Barlow. *Wired Style: Principles of English Usage in the Digital Age* notes in its entry that the earliest known usage of the word in its current sense is traceable to March 1991, but does not give further details (Hale and Scanlon, 1999).
- 3 Hakken urges caution in assuming that 'cyberspace' is an identifiable arena of human activity, noting that despite its utility in describing

at least one ... future social formation type, its eventual dynamics remain obscure, and so at least for now we should refrain from presuming its eventual

dominance or longevity, or even the stability of many of its current characteristics. (1999: 4)

- The 'anthropology of cyberculture' proposed by Escobar also proceeds tentatively, under the caveat that researchers 'can assume *a priori* neither the existence of a new era, nor the need for a new branch of anthropology' (1996: 118).
- 4 This writing style poses challenges for the academic critic. Writing about the hyperbolic e-culture magazine *Mondo 2000*, Vivian Sobchack (1996) notes that an academic-style response to these writings risks sounding stodgy, old-fashioned and irrelevant, while to adopt a similar tone to the writings under debate would risk replicating its excesses and undermining the critical project.
  - 5 This extension of 'selfhood' to corporations has been explored recently in the documentary film *The Corporation* (dir. Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott, 2003), where, extending the conceit to its logical conclusion, the filmmakers diagnose the corporation-subject as suffering from psychopathy by evaluating corporate behaviour according to the standards of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV).
  - 6 Donald Gutstein's *E. Con* (1999) offers a book-length study of revolutionary rhetoric as deployed by Canadian governmental agencies and the corporations that they regulate to privatize network technologies and reconceive universal access and the delivery of meaningful content as matters for the market to sort out.
  - 7 By 2002, Wyatt (2004) can identify four broad classes of metaphors deployed in internet discourse, more or less consistent effect: consumption metaphors, which consider the internet as a transaction zone of consumers and products; broadcasting metaphors, which imagine the online delivery and passive reception of entertainment products; hacking metaphors, which see networking technologies as puzzles and challenges to be solved or optimized; and security metaphors, which adopt a martial language of threat and containment, based in fear.
  - 8 Traffic 'shaping' or 'throttling' refers to the practice where an internet service provider artificially slows user uploads and downloads, generally seeking to limit or hinder access to bandwidth-intensive file sharing services such as BitTorrent. 'Shaping' is the term used by the industry, while 'throttling' is employed by user advocacy groups denouncing this practice. Cable giant Comcast in the USA, as well as major internet service providers Bell Canada and Rogers in Canada, have admitted to the practice (Cheng, 2007). Singel reports on the use of national security letters to compel disclosure from the Internet Archive, and that organization's collaboration with the EFF to mount a legal challenge against such use (Singel, 2008).
  - 9 Thomas and Wyatt (1999) identify the following nine 'pressure points' as key to the ongoing development of a commercialized global internet:
    - interconnection;
    - internet telephony;
    - technical protocols;
    - domain names;
    - 'push' technology;
    - intellectual property rights;
    - encryption;
    - taxation; and
    - censorship.

Drezner (2004) examines intellectual property rights, privacy and censorship as key issues tackled by nation-states in international political fora.

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