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The Internet vs. the State

by [Eric Garris](#)

This talk was delivered at the [Burton S. Blumert Conference on Gold, Freedom, and Peace](#).

At the 1977 Libertarian Party Convention, mind-expansion advocate and LSD guru Timothy Leary gave a speech that few of us took very seriously. He spoke of something called the Internet, a network that would connect computers worldwide, allowing participants from around the globe to sign on and retrieve text, photographs, audio and video instantaneously, and to communicate in realtime with anyone in the whole world who also had a computer and a connection. He said that it would be the new revolution against the current social order and stifling status quo. He predicted it would be much, much bigger than drugs in its ability to overthrow the establishment. Whereas tuning in, turning on and dropping out had been of great interest to a somewhat narrow subset of the population, everyone would be able to use the Internet, in his own way, and thus the new revolution against the old order would transcend class, age, nationality and all other demographics. The bourgeois would have just as much interest and use for it as the so-called counterculture. And nothing would ever again be the same.

As I said, no one at the time really believed it. We figured Leary had just done a little too much acid and his imagination had gotten the best of him. The network of information he described seemed totally impossible – and yet it exists, precisely as he predicted it, right now.

In fact, even Timothy Leary might be surprised to see the newest developments. Hardly a week goes by without some substantial revolution in cyberspace. When Leary died in 1996, data storage, processing and transfer had yet to approach anything anywhere near their current magnificent levels of utility and speed. And next year will make this year look like nothing. Already, we think back five years and can hardly comprehend the breathtaking progress over that time.

A lot of people say the Internet is overrated. They think it's just a bunch of vanity sites and ranting and raving kooks – and while they acknowledge it is nice that you can buy products online and have them delivered to your house, they doubt the net will prove as revolutionary of culture and industry as is predicted of it. Ever since the Dot-Com Boom of the late 1990s and the subsequent bust, many are inclined to dismiss the alleged

greatness of the net. Some see it only as a novelty or fad that will hardly evolve far past its current size and scope.

These people could not be more wrong. The Internet is not just *not* overrated – it is vastly underrated.

In the Internet we see our greatest hope for freedom and for the continual progress of humanity. In the Internet we see the anachronistic and obsolete institutions of society being pushed aside for a new dawn of better things. In the Internet we see the key to diminishing the power and status of the state and liberating ourselves from its oppression and deception.

Let us first consider an indirect but nevertheless essential reason to have hope for freedom, thanks to the World Wide Web. The Internet is proof of libertarianism in action. In this unregulated sector of society, we have seen more progress and changes and improvements than in any other sector in any comparably short period of time. No other invention went so far so quickly. And all of it rests on the economic principles of spontaneous order that we have been touting for years, but had to wait until now to see fully realized.

On eBay, we see millions of transactions occurring every day in one of the freest markets in human history. And almost all of the transactions are satisfactory for both parties. You really can trust most people most of the time to keep their word in business matters, and never before has it been so clearly shown. eBay's primary mechanisms of quality control and contract enforcement have sprung about in the voluntary sector, with no coercive monopoly. Reputation plays a very crucial role. If you have not sold much online to people who will vouch for you, it will be harder for you to unload a large expensive item at a reasonable price. The market at eBay is self-correcting. People succeed roughly as much as they deserve. Honesty and entrepreneurial cunning are rewarded and cheating and waste strongly discouraged. Every week, billions of dollars exchange hands on this site alone, which has encouraged people everywhere to trust the methods of mutual exchange and, even if only subconsciously, no longer associate market success with central planning. Entire businesses, small and not so small, thrive by selling on this site and doing nothing else. eBay could have probably brought us out of the Depression, and the unbridled capitalism it represents, along with all the millions of other marketing sites online, might be the only things keeping us out of another one.

Along with eBay came the success story of PayPal, another site that has helped to revolutionize an economic sector, in this case of money itself. Money can be anonymous and transferable to anywhere in the world. With the proliferation of such sites, we might see the unraveling of people's hope in the government as a major fiscal and monetary player. The Internet has many people more jealous of their money, more resistant to hand it over to the tax men, and that alone is a blessing.

Consider Google. Here we have the ability to search billions of pages of text in a matter of a couple seconds. With the expansion of this software into new applications and uses,

we are seeing the information age really coming to life. What used to take all day at the library to dig up, even just ten years ago, now sometimes takes less than a minute. The newest foray of Google into the book world is just the newest bloodless revolution – we now have the capability of searching the text of thousands of books, and their number is growing. Have you ever had a phrase that you remembered from one book or another, but you couldn't remember which? What only a decade ago might have kept you awake at night, causing a brain itch you might have taken with you to the grave, might soon only take a minute or two to look up and turn from nagging suspicion into verified fact.

I remember a scene in the movie [*All the President's Men*](#), where Robert Redford as Bob Woodward spends an entire day in a room full of phone books looking for the location of someone named on an incriminating check. Today, his search would have taken seconds.

The searchability of text has only blossomed with the great success of PDFs – one of many digital formats that is fast replacing its analog counterpart. I went to an Adobe Acrobat convention years ago, but was later disappointed when their enthusiastic promises of a totally searchable format weren't totally realized in the first few versions of the program. Anyone who has experienced how quickly and amazingly PDFs have evolved knows the folly of too quickly judging a technology by its initial incarnation. As with so many other things in the digital revolution, I can only expect PDFs to continue to impress us.

Perhaps nothing right now is so astonishing as a demonstration of the wonders of spontaneous order as that online encyclopedia, [Wikipedia](#). For those of you don't know, Wikipedia is the largest collection of encyclopedia articles in the world, which are written completely by volunteers. Anyone can edit the articles, anyone can write a new one. It now boasts more than 810,000 articles in English, as well as hundreds of thousands more in dozens of other languages. Each article was written, edited and rewritten by whoever in the world decided to contribute. The division of labor, the capacity of people for consensus building and totally voluntary cooperation, and the general goodness of most people to respect each other's boundaries are on display at this one site, and the entire world is better informed as a result.

Wikipedia is a microcosm of a phenomenon online that many statisticians would have denied was possible before it came about. Online we see millions of times more information than any of us has the capacity to read in our lifetimes – and it's all free to anyone who wants it. Interestingly enough, people will put effort into sharing information with their fellow man. The good side of humanity – the charity that we libertarians are so used to insisting exists and doesn't need government to thrive – is right there. It is online, for everyone to behold.

With the explosion of information especially, a transformation of publishing and information distribution that compares only to the invention of the printing press, one is tempted to wonder how long it will take for the people to realize how bad a deal public education really is. In the near future, people will see that the failing public school system can easily be replaced with a more customized, and far less-expensive system of learning.

The spontaneous order that has cultivated a free market in ideas, goods and services online has unmistakably been met with approval by the masses. It is a genuine market, open to everyone for miniscule start-up and administrative costs and nothing like the barriers of entry we see in the highly regulated industries of realspace. It is no surprise that most of the major Web sites and companies – eBay, Yahoo, Google, Pay Pal, Amazon – lean so heavily toward freedom and against the state. Unlike the big businesses of the mercantilist realspace economy, the big players in e-commerce tend to see the government more as a clumsy obstacle, or more likely, a nonentity rushing to catch up to the technology of 1997, rather than as a major player to lobby for kickbacks and favors. There are surely big software and hardware companies that are not so favorable toward freedom, but they are almost all in bed with the state in one way or another, and so have a vested interest in the corporate state surviving. Like the state itself, they will be on the losing side of history.

And when we see the way the state regards the Internet, we can only smile. Half the time the politicians claim enthusiasm. The other half they appear afraid, such as when they threaten to censor, tax or regulate it. But it is clear that the political establishment has no idea whatsoever what it's up against, and those of us who love liberty can only cheer.

In the 2000 campaign, George W. Bush was asked what he thought about a parody website, designed to look like his campaign page, which portrayed him as a former cocaine-using, corporate tool ignoramus. His response? He said he didn't think it was too funny and "there ought to be limits to freedom."

Many of us didn't know how to react at first. Should we be scared of this potential president's overtly anti-liberty statement? Or should we snicker that he would think that he could actually stop the wonderfully nasty things people were saying about him on the miraculously free Internet?

What was even more notable was how quick the word got out – thanks to the Internet – that Bush was against our freedom of speech. The man probably had no clue that what he said, along with all the many other stupid things he would say, once widely circulated on the net, would be far more damaging to his pretense of authority than any satire web site accusing him of being a drug addict.

During the last presidential campaign, almost everyone was online, keeping tabs on what the candidates were saying as had never been feasible for any of the other elections in American history. And so when John Kerry posted on his Web site that he believed in a mandatory national service program, some activists caught it immediately and, correctly predicting the Kerry camp would take it down as soon as it was noticed and criticized, make caches online for posterity's sake. The buzz about a possible draft spread infiltrated the mainstream, thanks to the net. People began to fear conscription would come back under Kerry, and others suggested Bush might bring it back, too.

The Kerry people took the offending line off its site – which was pointless, since more people probably read about the removal than read his online platform. But what was

hilarious was Bush's reaction. He said, "I hear there's rumors on the *Internets* that we're going to have a draft."

That's right, he referred to that which he clearly didn't understand at all as "the Internets." Well, when we see the dangers posed by the Internet to the obviously ignorant politicians who know nothing of its workings, we, along with the rest of the world, can see why Bush might think there ought to be limits to freedom.

Just recently, the White House has threatened to take action against *The Onion* for proprietary violation if it continues to use the Presidential Seal in its parodies. This story has also been spread all over the net. You can't make this stuff up. *The Onion's* writers could probably use some of the president's men on their staff.

Reporting on the goofs and verbal gaffes of politicians might sound like a trivial act in the overall fight for freedom, but it relates directly to the huge issue of news reporting and politics. I need not argue for the importance of a free, independent press as a bulwark for freedom, as a guardian of truth against political deception and an irreplaceable service to the people. Everyone in this room knows the significance of a press that will speak truth to power.

For many years, however, the establishment press has not done so. There was, of course, the wonderful anomaly of the Nixon years, and a few other aberrations, but the mainstream press has, for as long as I've been alive, been a reliable mouthpiece for the political establishment.

Back in the early nineteenth century, people at least knew that the press was biased. Political parties published the widely read papers. No one thought that a newspaper called the "Daily Democrat" was going to stray too much from the party line. Starting in the 1870s, there was a concerted effort toward so-called journalistic objectivity, and for a century afterwards people believed that what they read in black and white must have been neutral and true. So when a paper upheld this Splendid Little War or that New Frontier, this was the objective journalists talking, not just a partisan hack.

Thank goodness for the Internet! Nowadays, people *know* that anyone can start up a web page, and of the millions of people ranting out there, it is known that you cannot believe every word – or even most of them. And yet, the truth largely comes out through the processes of reputation. The Internet is not built around an arbitrary traditional hierarchy, nor is it mindlessly egalitarian. It combines the best of all worlds. Allowing total freedom of speech, grounded in private property, and total interconnectivity thanks to HTML and hyperlinks, anyone can say anything and yet few will believe you unless you substantiate it. Thomas Jefferson said, "Error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it." Were Jefferson alive today, he would see his insight applied in the real world beyond his expectations – on the Internet, where the error of opinion is unlimited and only rivaled by the efforts of good people to combat it, the truth does, more than in the old media, come out.

Jefferson also said that, if it were up to him, he would choose a world with newspapers but no government rather than a world with government but no newspapers. Thanks to the net, we might get to see the day when both artifacts are finally swept into the status of irrelevancy they deserve. People still think of the press as anti-government, especially given the current so-called liberal media and the current so-called conservative president, but it's just not so. They are basically on the same side, while the Internet is definitively on ours.

Whereas the establishment media echoed the administration line about weapons of mass destruction during the run-up to the Iraq war, the Internet was bursting with dissent and exposure of the lies. Whereas the imbedded establishment media are dependent upon the good graces of the emperor and his cabinet, the Internet is saturated with independent thought and criticism. While we can trust the talking heads on television to cower in fear of losing access to the White House or even being harassed by the FCC, there are billions of gigabytes of information on the Internet from which we can spring forward to attack the state and recoil back into a crowd of friendly faces.

And the truth is winning, and the Internet is winning, in the market of information and news media. The print newspapers are hardly surviving the brutalities of the free market and competition. According to the Audit Bureau of Circulations, there was a 2.6 percent drop for the circulation of 786 papers over a six-month period this year. 1.2 million subscribers in that time abandoned their papers. According to the Pew Research Center, 23 percent of people under 30 read a daily newspaper, contrasted with 60 percent of their elders.

And as the Internet is the medium of the future, it is the medium of the young. If we libertarians expect our ideas to thrive, we must get them to the young. And the Internet is where they are, with all the expectations of freedom and doubts about the government I have outlined.

Doubtless, the Internet is taking over. And it only makes sense. There soon will be no structural, operational, logistical or technological reason for hardcopy to be a major player any more.

Witness the old media struggle just to figure out how to deal with the new medium. They try to charge for their subscriptions online, often to compensate for the losses they suffer in their hardcopy operations. When new online journals are popping up every week, some of us might even feel sorry for the anachronisms being swept away. But we shouldn't. The newspaper as we have known it all our lives will largely go the way of the buggy whips and ice delivery. Good riddance.

For libertarians, and opponents of war, the Internet has especially been a boon. Now, I hear all the time people saying that we can talk on forums and Web sites all we want, but real activism is what's needed to make a difference. Well, even on this, who can doubt how much the Internet has done? In 2003, twenty million people congregated in protests, all around the world, in anticipation of and in mutual opposition to the U.S. and U.K. war

against Iraq. 20 million! This would have been unimaginable in previous times. Thanks to telecommunications, and especially e-mail and Web sites, activists were able to arrange, more-or-less spontaneously and in decentralized fashion, these enormous shows of international solidarity against the war. This was not in any way a real world departure from the ways of the Internet in political activism. It was in fact only possible because of our online capacity.

These days we will sometimes finally see leaked information about secret meetings in the Oval Office of the Johnson administration from 40 years ago. Meanwhile, we are already getting leaked information about secret meetings in the Oval Office of the Bush administration from last week! If the Internet had existed during the 1960s, the Vietnam war would have ended sooner. It is because of the Internet that there is such universal dissatisfaction of the current regime, such low approval ratings, and it was largely due to the net that even right after 9/11 so many people were willing to speak up against war. Such dissidence would have not been nearly as easy during the World Wars or Cold War, when most information ran through the old media oligopoly. No wonder the politicians fear the net.

The state and its old media simply cannot keep up. At Antiwar.com and LewRockwell.com and hundreds of other sites we see the truth coming out every day. A politician lies, and as soon as someone with a computer knows, we all know. An innocent family is bombed by the government and video footage appeared is on your desktop in an hour. A famous columnist tries to pass off a slimy smear or a dishonest argument in the mainstream press, and suddenly a thousand people are debunking him and ridiculing him on their independent blogs.

Antiwar.com was little more than a hobby of mine when I started it back ten years ago, but if you told me at the end of the 1990s how many readers we'd have now I'd say you were as crazy as I thought Timothy Leary was in 1977. We reach nearly 100,000 – three football stadiums of people – *every single day*. They read from across the political spectrum and from more than 100 countries, and they see the radical libertarian case for nonintervention backed up by a dozen columns and 200 articles of new stories, culled from the independent and mainstream press, daily.

LewRockwell.com also offers an indispensable service, reaching tens of thousands every day, far beyond what libertarian publishers would have ever thought possible just five years ago. For many years, libertarians were so few in number and those who wanted to make a difference spent the majority of their time and resources just to organize and get their message out to a small number of people. To succeed at a print run of 1,000 was considered a grand accomplishment, and Lew achieves that, through the virtual world, dozens of times over, *every single day*.

No other website comes close to LewRockwell.com in reaching those type of numbers with an explicitly libertarian message.

The best libertarian commentary on the newest political crimes appear on your computer first thing in the morning. Old writers, new writers, scholars on economics, antiwar journalists, revisionist historians, anti-state intellectuals and radicals of the libertarian ethic, all together, all on one site.

The archives available at LRC, and at Lew's other organization, the Mises Institute, are alone a wonder. He has made thousands of the greatest writings of the classical liberal and libertarian movement available to anybody, anytime. And it's all at a cost of nothing for the reader. Classic economic texts and historical essays are completely retrievable and searchable with a click of a button. Send that one compelling article to your friend that you were arguing endlessly with about taxes or gun control; if it can't convince him, maybe nothing can. What we see at LRC and at the rest of the great libertarian sites is the libertarian movement finally finding its perfect method for outreach. Nowhere else are people so open-minded, disabused of the administration's newspeak and the conventional history and economics that plague academia and the mass media, and ready to consider voluntary, peaceful solutions to fix society's problems and serve our individual needs. Nowhere else are people so simultaneously skeptical of the current social order but grateful for their fellow man and the many fruits of voluntary, free exchange.

The Internet really is the destined home for libertarianism, and our greatest hope for freedom. On it we see the free market of ideas and services flourish even as the politicians try to stamp out civil society in realspace. On it we see the truth win out over the political and media establishment. On it we see the spirit of liberty.

The state cannot catch up to, it cannot match, and it cannot begin to comprehend the full power of the Internet. Politicians are baffled by it because it doesn't conform to their assumptions about the world, about human organization, about the need for central planning. The glorious Internet is a major source of confusion for all with a statist mindset.

The net is revolutionizing society, all toward more voluntary, civil and efficient methods of organization. It has given us all a way to participate in speaking the truth and standing up to the state. The Internet is ours – it belongs to the people and especially the friends of freedom and peace who feel so at home online because it is so free and so much the way we'd like to see the rest of the world.

And so, when the revolution comes – when the state declines and freedom triumphs – the Internet will have played a deciding role. And I am hopeful of that future, and the move our culture is making toward it. Thanks to the net, our wildest imaginations and dreams might come true, and our destiny and our society might prove to be – just like LewRockwell.com, and just like so much of the Internet culture – anti-state, anti-war, and pro-market.

My great thanks to [Anthony Gregory](#), without whom I could not have organized my thoughts so well.

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Eric Garris [[send him mail](#)] has been a political activist for 38 years. He is currently Webmaster for [Antiwar.com](#) and [LewRockwell.com](#).

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