Communication-Imperative to Internet Renaissance by 2010

By Daniel Berninger, dan@danielberninger.com

Renaissance Challenge
Double Internet population between
December 31, 2006 to December 31, 2010
We who view communication as an imperative
Dedicate ourselves to expand the reach of the Internet
As a profound opportunity to promote prosperity
By resisting vandals and designs of would-be gatekeepers
By overcoming circumstances that divide

Wherefore art thou renaissance?

Campaigns working to expand access and unleash the promise of the Internet have a common motivation. Let's call it the communication-imperative. Some laud the Internet as comparable to the printing press, but Gutenberg's invention sparked a 200 year period of accelerated progress in art, literature, and learning known as the Renaissance. One might ask, what happened to our renaissance? Current events seem more consistent with medieval feudalism. The Internet may yet produce a renaissance, but we need to cope with forces seeking to reign it in and learn how to better sustain a world without borders. Both outcomes require moving communication from afterthought to imperative.

Radical improvements in communication threaten the entire power status quo. Reporters Without Borders identifies a dozen countries as enemies of the Internet (e.g. Burma, Iran, and China), but the Internet also upsets plans of corporations that shape, if not control, government policy. Rapid growth, in the late 1990's, disappeared where telephone companies asserted control over access. Limited competition means most connections lack the type of continuous improvement required by the infotech ecosystem. The one billion people estimated to use the Internet represents only 15% of the planet's population and far fewer enjoy the type of connections required for full participation.

Communication does not enjoy the same status as energy, but it represents no less an essential input to economic activity. Developments in communication shape human history. The Renaissance followed the printing press, because less expensive books produced educated citizens that demanded more representative government. Communication provides the basis for civil society and the antidote to weapons of war. Barriers to communication contributing to the Cuban missile crisis helped motivate a telephone cable to connect leaders in Washington, DC, and Moscow.

The Internet arrives after 50 years of relatively little progress in communication and despite efforts by telcos to resist the threat it poses to their profits. A telephone call between neighbors in 1950 differs little from the same call today. Compare this to the record of progress in healthcare, transportation, or, in particular, other areas of information technology. Communication might have applications as pervasive as electricity, if not for efforts to defeat the competition necessary to produce innovation. Notable exceptions of progress where competition prevailed, as in wireless, still leaves telcos defending plain old telephone service as the source of most of their revenues.

The urgent need to break barriers blocking Internet renaissance arises as a matter of self-interest, not altruism. Consider the tragically poor return obtained from pursuit of war. Whatever motivations the US might claim for the invasion of Iraq, the eventual $1 trillion cost of asserting control over a country, with a $50 billion economy, reveals stunning inefficiency. Consider the cost burdens placed on economies around the world as trauma in Iraq helped turn $25 oil in April 2003 into $75 oil by April 2006.

Make renaissance competition for war

Renaissance depends on a communication-imperative replacing the coercion imperative. The global war on terror and an Internet renaissance cannot coexist. The terror war gets sold to both sides as the price of freedom, but freedom, as in the ability to choose the course of ones life, requires a level of prosperity. The cost and destruction of war increases the number of people on both sides unable to afford basic needs. The wealthy do not enjoy freedom where a gap between rich and poor makes safety a persistent concern and turns homes into prisons.

Opposition to the Internet comes from those trying to keep communication expensive. This includes more than just telephone, cable, and media companies. Governments depend on coercion as the basis for staying in power. Coercion provides the means for war. Comunication provides the means for renaissance. Coercion and communication anchor two ends of the spectrum of human interaction. Pursuing one closes the door on the other. Communication reduces the divisions among us that represent a prerequisite for coercion. Inexpensive communication reduces the poverty and fear making coercion the imperative.

A communication-imperative arises not as an easy solution but as the only solution. Coercion does not resolve disputes, it perpetuates them. Communication allows those following the first Golden Rule - doing unto others

as they would have done on to themselves - cope with those asserting the second golden rule - he who has the gold makes the rules.

The pursuit of war or renaissance depends on whether one plans to compel or inspire. The former reflects a desire to accumulate power more than advocate an idea. Connections to the Internet allow people to build a meritocracy of ideas as an alternative to allocating scarce resources via coercion. Coercion produces a cycle of violence as the prosperity of one person comes at the cost of another. The temporary nature of any victory condemns our children to continue wars we fail to stop.

Whatever one believes about the concepts of heaven and hell, the nature of trust and fear give them reality in the world. People that co-exist with mutual trust enjoy the benefits attributed to heaven. Pervasive fear produces suffering associated with hell. Denial does not protect those following a path of coercion from consequences. The action of individuals and governments contribute to these outcomes in predictable ways. The use of excessive coercion by government requires compliance of citizens through passivity, participation, or funding. It obtains legitimacy from the silence of citizens.

Coercion disappears if borders disappear

Communication already gets favored over coercion where the perception of shared destiny make collaboration and relationship building a matter of self-interest. Alliances form in the defense of territory, but only because proximity eases communication along with coercion. Communication technology enables relationship building, that goes beyond proximity and surface traits, to include an unbounded range of shared interests. The unmetered nature of the Internet, with respect time and distance, helps communication compete with proximity as the basis for trust.

The line drawing exercise always proves self-fulfilling. Distinctions presumed in defining friend and foe, whether between countries or family members, shape behaviors that tend to give cause to even imagined disconnects. A cycle of retribution produces an ever widening divide. A borderless society may remain out of reach, but invented divisions do not release us from a common fate on Earth. The behaviors feeding a cycle of violence do not prove the existence of inevitable or necessarily permanent conflicts.

A communication-imperative argues for communication in those situations where there exists a choice. Communication does not immediately stop the person breaking into a house or provide food for a hungry child. Choice requires strength to cope with immediate threats of coercion and uncertainty about trust. Unprovoked coercion arises from insecurity about whether strength will prove sufficient to protect wealth, not just the urge to accumulate wealth. Strength and

urgency also shape how long slights can be attributed to miscommunication rather than ill will.

Those seeking to defend power appreciate, by experience, the imperative of controlling communication. Everyone else needs to get engaged in defending communication as the means to build trust not power. Consider the difference between the opposition in France to the use of Yahoo! for selling Nazi items and the comprehensive usage restrictions in China. The former addresses trust and latter power. China cannot remove empowerment potential of the Internet without destroying the value of connectivity. A communication-imperative requires resisting gatekeepers as well as vandals.

A communication-imperative does not eliminate coercion, but coercion will never move beyond necessary evil. Coercion offers the last resort where communication fails and violations of trust persist. The application of coercion must follow predictable and measured formulas in pursuit of accountability not retaliation. Overzealous government produces a chilling effect that works against a communication-imperative. Change requires exploring the limits of openness. We already know how tyranny works.

Internet Protocol does not define morality or stop humans from violating ethical standards. The Internet does not qualify as inherently good or evil. It reflects the intent of users. Implementing a communication-imperative involves coping with bad actors like any other activity. The arrival of spam, viruses, and various other violations of trust represent nothing new in the grand scheme of human history. We build roads despite the risks drivers pose to one another and with the knowledge roads facilitate crime, but rules of operation and enforcement attempt to minimize potential hazards.

Make communication imperative before it's too late

The opportunity for Internet renaissance continues to slip away. The number of people with Internet access expanded 50% in 1996 when John Perry Barlow crafted his "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace." By 2006, the population of the Internet grew only 15%, and new equipment made censorship and discrimination easier. Connecting half the people on Earth requires reaching those earning $2 per day, but the network effect gives existing users significant incentive to help expand participation.

Conflicts over control and international politics threaten to fragment the global Internet along traditional territorial lines. A communication-imperative means defending the notion of cyberspace as a place where distinctions making communication difficult in the material world recede. It means treating the Internet like the oceans and space as a resource for everyone on the planet, beyond the control of any one government.

As of December 31, 2006, the population of the Internet stands at 917 million. The total considers the Internet World Stats estimate minus the countries identified by Reporters Without Borders as attempting to restrict usage. This makes the Internet #3 among world populations after China (1.3bn) and India (1.1bn). The Renaissance Challenge calls for doubling the Internet population by December 31, 2010. A self-sustaining ecosystem – an Internet renaissance – can emerge as people get connected, behave in a manner consistent with a communication-imperative, and actively defend their right to be connected. It makes no difference if the process starts at the point of everyone hating each other (as seems a given with our wiring for self-interest.) The seeds for expanding trust and overcoming obstacles to borderless society already exist with a core group of activists, investors, lawyers, entrepreneurs, and academics.

The Internet and communication provide an alternative to territory and coercion as the means to organize society. The Internet expands opportunities for communication as dramatically as nuclear weapons did for coercion. However, the prophecy of the meek inheriting the Earth threatens to get realized by the strong destroying themselves and most forms of life. Books made war more destructive, not obsolete. Campaigns pursuing a communication-imperative address the same risk as those working to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. They deserve the same urgency and resources. We need to make war compete with renaissance. The power status quo will continue working to undermine the Internet as **renaissance** looks like **revolution** from their perspective.

Daniel Berninger - Washington, DC based financial analyst working for Tier1 Research. Daniel has over a decade of experience that includes helping to launch three prominent VoIP startups - ITXC, Vonage, and Free World Dialup. His expertise on the intersection of telecom and the Internet has been sought by Congress, FCC, Federal Reserve, and state PSC's. His work covers the financial market implications of Internet applications displacing traditional telephone company products. He won the VON Pioneer Award as co-founder of the VON Coalition. Daniel earned BEE and MEE degrees at Villanova University and completed coursework toward a Ph.D. in System Engineering at the University of Pennsylvania. Daniel has been interviewed on CNBC, NPR and other programs. He gets quoted as a source in the New York Times, Business Week, WSJ, Fortune, Forbes, AP, and trade press.

Contact via **dan@danielberninger.com**