THE HARVARD CONFERENCE ON THE INTERNET AND SOCIETY[1]

Edited by O'Reilly & Associates, Inc.[2]
Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. 1997.
<http://www.hup.harvard.edu>
Pp. 518. $32.95 (soft with CD-ROM). ISBN 0-674-45932-6.

In his keynote address to the spring 1996 Harvard Conference on the Internet and Society, Steven McGeady[3] of Intel noted:

> The Internet is over 25 years old . . . and it's the 20th anniversary . . . of the personal computer. . . . The technology we're discussing has become an "overnight success" in 25 to 50 years. . . . [H]aving had [that time] to gestate, we are in for some changes on the order of magnitude of the Reformation (p. 61).

The Harvard Conference on the Internet and Society ("*Internet and Society*"), edited by O'Reilly & Associates, chronicles the Conference. *Internet and Society* illuminates the issues posed by the Internet's evolution as well as the myriad potential impacts on society that the growth and change predicted by McGeady might have.

I. SYNOPSIS

The Conference was held on May 28-31, 1996, at Harvard University. H.T. Kung[4] explains in the Introduction that "Harvard's goal in sponsoring [this] conference was to provide understanding by bringing together some of the most thoughtful and articulate leaders in important fields — business, education, medicine, law, and government,

---

1. This book summarizes the 1996 Harvard Conference on the Internet and Society. Readers who are interested in attending the 1998 Conference, scheduled for May 26-29, 1998, at Harvard University, should visit the website <http://cybercon98.harvard.edu>.

2. O'Reilly & Associates publishes numerous technology-oriented books. Their website is <http://www.ora.com/>.

3. Steve McGeady is Vice President, Internet Strategy, Internet Communications Group, Intel Corp.

4. H.T. Kung is Gordon McKay Professor, Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, Harvard Division of Engineering and Applied Sciences, Harvard University.

as well as technology — to discuss the potent effects of the Internet on modern life" (p. vii). This volume presents an edited transcription of the keynote addresses as well the panel discussions, which are grouped under the following headings: Technology, Library & Publishing, Education, Health Care, Press & Politics, Public Policy, Law, Business, and the generic Panels.

Internet and Society opens with the special address by Neil L. Rudenstine, President of Harvard University, followed by the keynote addresses given by McGeady, Larry Tesler[5] of Apple Computer, Bill Gates[6] of Microsoft, Diana Lady Dougan[7] of the Global Information Infrastructure Commission, Scott McNealy[8] of Sun Microsystems, and Enrico Pesatori,[9] then with Digital Equipment Corporation. All spoke of their organizations' strategies for creating value through the Internet, as well as of the promises, problems, and threats posed by the Internet's emergence. The keynote speakers stressed the responsibilities that the players on the Internet have to one another and to society globally.

The volume then recounts each panel. The Technology discussions focused on the rate at and means by which the speed of the Internet will improve, on the possible ways of financing the expansion and improvement of Internet infrastructure, and on the potential for wireless Internet access. Additionally, the Technology panels addressed the problems of ensuring privacy, securing transactions, and of building community and maintaining interpersonal relations on the Internet.

In the Library & Publishing panels, the participants debated the possibilities of universal access to the Internet and of closing the chasm between the information-rich and the information-poor. The discussions also tackled the problems of proper organization, management, documentation, quality control, and expansion of content on the World Wide Web ("Web"). They additionally assessed the merits of various tactical partnerships among businesses, universities, public libraries, and the government. Moreover, censorship and the safeguarding of intellectual property rights received attention.

The Education panelists extolled the benefits the Internet has provided in the classroom: computer and digital literacy among

---

5. Larry Tesler is Vice President, Internet Platforms, Apple Computer.

6. Bill Gates is Chair and Chief Executive Officer, Microsoft Corp.

7. Diana Lady Dougan is Senior Adviser, Center for Strategic and International Studies; Chair, International Communications Studies Program.

8. Steve McNealy is Chair and Chief Executive Officer, Sun Microsystems Inc.

9. Enrico Pesatori is currently President and Chief Executive Officer, Tandem Computers Inc. At the time of the Conference, he was Vice President and General Manager, Computer Systems Division, Digital Equipment Corp.

students, a truly global learning experience, and access to previously unattainable teaching resources. They also proposed possible solutions to the problems of high hardware costs, inadequate teacher training, and unequal Internet access.

In the Health Care discussions, the panelists described how use of the Internet has coordinated and expedited research, furthered home health care, disseminated information on disease prevention, and linked far-flung patients and specialists. They also related how the Web has improved and prolonged life for terminally ill patients, particularly those with AIDS, by giving them access to information on the latest advances against their diseases and support from other patients. Insights into the future impact of the Web on health care permeated the panelists' conversations.

The Press & Politics panels centered on the likelihood of universal Internet access, the effects of online communities on geographical communities, and the social and political implications of virtual communities and Web use. They also assessed the possibilities for and the merits of online voting. Furthermore, the discussions explored the promise of the Internet for making politicians more aware of and responsive to their constituents' interests. They also examined the threat to journalistic standards and credibility from the blurring between Web advertising and news.

The Public Policy discussions revolved around government's role in the development and regulation of the Internet, interoperability standards for the Internet, and control over Web access and infrastructure. The panelists also spoke about appropriate pricing structures for Internet access and content, and means of ensuring digital literacy among the public. Additionally, the panelists debated the propriety of national versus global Internet regulation, as well as whether government, business confederacies, or market forces would optimally regulate the Web.

The Law panels dealt with tailoring intellectual property law to meet the unique challenges posed by the Web. They also debated the normative issues of Internet censorship and the practical obstacles to controlling content. Finally, the Law panels discussed the antitrust concerns posed by digital convergence and integration.

In the Business discussions, the participants examined means of discovering, creating, and extracting value from the Internet. The sessions also explored how the Web has broadened customer relationships, changed the process of brand development, and affected new market formation.

Internet and Society concludes with Panels — discussions about who owns the Internet, cultural imperialism through the Web, and new

organizational forms enabled by the Internet. These final panels generally asserted that the challenges posed by the Internet's emergence and growth are more sociological than technical, and that the normative questions about the Internet's impact on society have more import than the practical ones.

II. ASSESSMENT

The book's unstructured account of the Conference is both its greatest strength and its greatest weakness. The volume's almost verbatim recording of the Conference enables the reader to experience the participants' dialogue in its full context and to follow the course of the debates. Accurately and completely relating the views expressed is important because many of them will likely prove self-fulfilling. The technologists, executives, lawyers, policy-makers, scholars, health care providers, journalists, and educators who participated in the Conference are or will be the leaders shaping the Internet's evolution and managing its effects on society. Accordingly, readers interested in learning the opinions, hypotheses, and perspectives of leading thinkers, as well as how those thinkers relate to and defend their views against each other, will appreciate this format — as will readers thinking about attending the 1998 Harvard Conference on the Internet and Society.[10] *Internet and Society* accurately relates the content and breadth of the Conference's panels, as well as the give-and-take that occurred within them.

However, readers relatively unfamiliar with the Internet who are seeking a basic understanding of the technology, as well as more knowledgeable readers pursuing information on a particular topic, will find *Internet and Society* lacking. The book offers little summary and critical evaluation, either of the individual panels or of the major issues of the Conference. Though the editors placed the press release recounting each panel discussion before its transcript, these news stories vary widely in their completeness and depth. The book does not highlight the topics discussed in each panel, nor does it emphasize the conclusions and open questions. This paucity of substantial synopsis prevents the book from meeting one of the primary goals that Kung laid out for the conference: helping to cure "the lack of popular understanding about this technology" (p. vii).

---

10. *See supra* note 1.

The accompanying CD-ROM[11] will help those readers who are looking for specific information and discussions. In addition to version 3.0 of Microsoft's Internet Explorer, the disk contains the entire contents of the book. Readers can search the text using key words and names, as well as by using the hyperlinks to move among related discussions. This tool provides, in effect, an interactive form of the Name and Subject Indexes included in the book. Hyperlinks to background materials on the Web are an additional resource available for certain panels.

By raising more questions about the Internet's social impact than it answers, *Internet and Society* makes clear the need for thoughtfully managing the Internet's evolution. Also, by revealing glimpses of the Internet's future, the book instills a sense of hope and possibility. In the final appraisal, however, the absence of critical analysis and summary in *Internet and Society* makes the book less readable and accessible — and ultimately minimizes its impact. As Janice Kaplan[12] of News Corporation observed, "[T]he good news about the World Wide Web is that everybody has a voice and the bad news about the Web is that everybody has a voice. . . . [U]nfiltered voices don't always hold our interest" (p. 289). Those words could just as well describe *Internet and Society*.

Carl F. Giesler

---

11. Readers who desire this feature should make sure they purchase the version of *Internet and Society* with the CD-ROM; the book is also available without it.

12. Janice Kaplan was most recently Deputy Editor, *TV Guide*, and Editor-in-Chief of Web-based iGUIDE.