

digital humanity

Is the Internet a giant incubator for another Renaissance?

1.3
.COMMUNICATION

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KURZFASSUNG

Der Artikel in 10 Sekunden

A brief **history of the Internet** shows the momentum of active humans applying creative impulses toward free expression and toward community building. All this has happened within two decades. So, Yes to a coming Renaissance of humanity through the Internet. Unfortunately, after the Yes, there also comes a No.

Will we in our lifetimes see the Internet blossom with a new humanism? Is the Matrix a giant incubator for another Renaissance? Or is humanity simply feeding machines that are ultimately serving themselves rather than our creativity? The oracle of history looking at the past two decades gives a double answer: Yes, if we look at the rapid evolution of the Internet. No, if we look at the performance record of human beings.

A "brief history of the Internet" began with geeks, the tech-minded minority who taught computers to communicate, first mainframes, then desktop computers. Geek theorists like Douglas Engelbart at Xerox Parc (Palo Alto, California) spun intricate ideas about "amplifying human intelligence." [Note: A geek is someone who follows the Wiki directions on "How to Make a Wallet Out of Duct Tape" and then actually uses the wallet as a fashion statement.] Engelbart's hopeful vision of scientific collaboration followed the metaphysical footsteps of Gottfried W. Leibniz. Government-sponsored and academic researchers sent the first emails and created collegial online groups.

Then in the early 1970s, CompuServe Information Services (CIS) opened a new market by selling dial-up connections to hobbyists so they could use email, newsgroups, and file-sharing at home. CIS also led the way for businesses to

authorize credit card transactions by dialing up Visa International. By the early 1990s, CompuServe was swallowed by America Online (AOL), which replaced the minute-based price of a dial-up connection with hourly rates. AOL became a huge success and inspired several direct-to-the-Internet companies, like EarthLink. Customers fled from private pipeline services to the broad, open superhighway with its infinite choices and software options. What was formerly geek hobby became a major commercial enterprise. In 2001, the media giant Time Warner merged with AOL which, during the 1990's bubble, held higher stock value than Time Warner itself. Time Warner planned to consolidate commercial advertising across print, TV, radio, and the Internet. Geeks went shopping and millions became online consumers.

As broadband connections spread through cable, phone, and satellite, the dial-up access to the Net was doomed. By July of 2006, dial-up subscribers to AOL had shrunk to less than 19 million subscribers in the same year that saw PC World Magazine declare AOL "the worst tech product of all time". The bulletin boards and magazine racks simulated by AOL could not compete with the customers who were neither geeks nor simply shoppers. The new customers wanted bulletin boards, yes, but bulletin boards flexible enough to be shaped and managed by users themselves. The customer was no longer passive but an active participant with a home page that responds to changing needs, whims, and interests. Google and Yahoo enabled that shift and presented a portal that asked "Where do you want to go?" This replaced the AOL model that had asked "What do you want to buy?"

Increasingly active, the new generation of users became more than shoppers and information consumers. The evolving users want to shape MySpace, sharing photos, event logs, and personal commentaries. MySpace now outstrips Google, Yahoo, and all other portals on the Internet. Coming up quickly behind MySpace since 2005 is the video-sharing YouTube which, according to Nielsen/NetRatings, has almost 20 million visitors each month. Even major TV networks like NBC and CBS have dropped their copyright restrictions on video footage so that their clips can be downloaded for free at YouTube.

Digitaler Mensch in Zahlen, 5

Zeit, die Ben Cook aus Utah für die Sätze

„The razor-toothed piranhas of the genera *Serrasalmus* and *Pygocentrus* are the most ferocious freshwater fishes in the world. In reality they seldom attack a human" benötigt, um sie in sein Handy zu tippen und damit im Guinness-Buch der Rekorde zu stehen: 42,22 Sekunden

Notwendige Anzahl der übers Handy versendeten Short Messages mit dem Satz

„Ich verstoße dich“, die laut Gerichtsbeschluss in Dubai genügen, wenn sich ein Mann von seiner Frau scheiden lassen will: 3

Weltweiter Umsatz mit Handy-Klingeltönen 2004: 3 Milliarden Euro

Häufigkeit, mit der der Schnappi-Klingelton verkauft wurde: 200.000-mal

Zeit, die vergeht, wenn man alle 15.000 vierminütigen Songs, die auf einen

60-GB-iPod passen, hintereinander anhört: 41 Tage und 16 Stunden

Häufigkeit, mit der das Gerät währenddessen aufgeladen werden müsste: 50-mal

Anzahl der Atomkraftwerke, die allein in Deutschland für den Stand-by-Betrieb

von Millionen Elektrogeräten nötig sind: 2

Häufigkeit, mit der ein Londoner täglich von Überwachungskameras erfasst wird: 300-mal

Zahl der Funktionen, die Mercedes-Benz im vergangenen Jahr

aus den Automodellen entfernte, weil kein Fahrer sie brauchte beziehungsweise wusste, wie er sie benutzen sollte: 600

Faktor, mit dem sich die Anzahl der Mikroben multipliziert, wenn man statt auf die Klobrille auf eine Computertastatur greift: 400

This brief history shows the momentum of active humans applying creative impulses toward free expression and toward community building. All this has happened within two decades. So, the oracle says Yes to a coming Renaissance of humanity through the Internet. Unfortunately, after the Yes, there also comes a No. The tremendous pressures on American culture after September 11, 2001 might have raised expectations for new initiatives in international communication. The Internet is the ideal framework for transnational initiatives. As a response to cultural hostilities, the Net might have served as seedbed for innovative communities of young people across all nations through game-based avatars (virtual identities). Such “avatar diplomacy” could create friendships not unlike those of the paper-based “pen pals” movement. During a three-year period, plans for avatar diplomacy were indeed sketched, detailed, and

pitched to institutions like colleges, universities, and UNESCO-sponsored conferences. Despite many presentations and discussions in the U.S., Europe, and Scandinavia, none of these plans went beyond the stage of “nice idea”. Even academic institutions took an attitude of business as usual: “We must continue to pursue our mission and do what we do best – what we have always been doing. Transnational initiatives are uncharted waters and the risks are many. We are a business after all.”

Such a cowardly performance is not surprising when viewed in the light of human history’s Age of Iron. The No to Renaissance is a solid wall of complacency that stops momentum. Yet No to a Matrix Renaissance only calls for the music of another voice, the poet Wallace Stevens: “After the final no there comes a yes | And on that yes the future world depends. | No was the night. Yes is this present sun.” ■

**Menschenbilder
von Guadalupe
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aus der Serie
„La saga“**

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