

Make Room for Generation Net

A Cultural Imperative

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"Is it possible to effectively collaborate online with someone you've never met face to face?" This question was raised at a recent workshop for Intelligence Community members, and it received a tentative and hesitant "Yes ... maybe ... well, no, not really," from the retired general who was leading the discussion. What it *should* have received is good-natured laughter and a call for *serious* questions from the floor. *Of course* people can effectively collaborate in cyberspace with people they have never encountered in "meat" space. It happens all the time. Just ask any teenager.

Why did no one laugh at this absurd question? Perhaps because their life experience didn't enable them to see the humor—which is an indirect way of saying they were probably too old to get the joke. At the ripe old age of 30, I was the youngest person in the room by at least a decade. Most of the primary participants appeared to be 20 years my senior, and the presiding (retired) general mentioned his 40 years of government service several times. No wonder this crowd found net centricity and online collaborations such tough nuts to crack.

The GenNet Experience

Please don't misunderstand. These people were very intelligent and technically savvy. It is not a question of their not understanding modern technology. There was an impressive amount of mental fire-power and loads of experience in that room. The problem was a shortage of

GoJoBananas (dot-com, of course) will sell you a JoBananas Club water dish for your cat or dog that automatically sends you an e-mail or text message when the bowl is empty.



relevant experience. I am barely young enough myself to have had a PC in high school, and that first machine was so primitive it didn't have a hard drive. Even in college my computer didn't have a mouse, a GUI, or a modem (let alone the World Wide Web). In Internet time, I'm already approaching fogley-hood, whether I like it or not; so how much more so these gray-haired workshopers. And coming right behind me is a new generation, of which I am barely on the cusp. Look out for Generation Net.

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Something happens to a person who is exposed to technology at an early age, and GenNet has grown up with the Internet, cell phones, and other fruits of the IT revolution. This exposure affects their understanding of how the world works, it shapes the way they communicate—imho (and if you don't know what that means, you'd better check out < www.netlingo.com/emailsh.cfm >)—and it influences the way they establish and maintain connections with other people. These new technologies and methodologies are not the sole property of the young, but their impact on a person is largely proportional to the age at which he or she is introduced. If your world has always included things like Google, Instant Messaging, and Amazon.com, you are going to view the world differently from those of us who grew up without them.

An (Un)Wired Water Bowl?

An Associated Press article by Martha Irvine recently pointed out the Internet has “created a different (wider/more inclusive and persistent) notion of community” for GenNet. Steve Jones, a senior research fellow with the Pew Internet & American Life Project, put it this way: “Students are continuously connected to other students and friends and family in ways that older generations would never have imagined.” This focus on connections shapes the way they live, work, and play. It even finds expression in something as apparently trivial as making sure a pet has water.

If all goes to schedule, by the time you read this, GoJoBananas (dot-com, of course) will sell you a JoBananas Club water dish (called “Thirst Alert” and costing less than \$40) for your cat or dog that automatically sends you an e-mail or text message when the bowl is empty. One might wonder how wired you must be if a text message about an empty water bowl will get your attention before you notice the actual bowl itself (or the thirsty pet). The answer is: Not Very. And by the way, nobody says “wired” anymore in the Wild Wireless World in which we live.

What may seem absurdly unnecessary to people of a certain generation is perfectly reasonable to those who are coming of age in The Connected Era. A water bowl that sends e-mail may be a novelty now, but it moves us closer to the day that your refrigerator will tell you (text you) that you're out of milk before you leave work ... an act that will (eventually) surprise and impress *nobody*. The social/cultural/psychological impact of receiving text messages from household appliances and quadruped serving dishes can scarcely be overstated. We ignore it at our *great* peril.

The Missing Link

OK, back to the aforementioned workshop. When the senior ranking person (a two-star general) pounded the table and said, “I just want [*expletive deleted*] Google on SIPRnet,” his request was perfectly legitimate—albeit some-

what tardy, since Google has been around the civilian world since 1998. Ultimately, the problem is not with his question or his timing, but with his audience. He simply wasn't talking to the right people.

The ones who really get it, who have the Internet in their blood, who understand the power of networks on a visceral level, and who have vast experience with online collaboration and information gathering/creating/consuming/sharing were not in the room—and *they should have been*. On this particular topic, a handful of outspoken lieutenants would bring much more to the fight than a whole bucket of retired colonels. Of course, there are exceptions in every generation, but on that day, in that particular meeting, the proverbial exceptions were either silent or absent.

The problem was a lack of generational diversity. It's not that the individuals involved were too old, but that the group was too homogenous. Their experience base was too similar and monotoned—and *limited*. There is no need to kick any of these seasoned experts out of the room and replace them with kids, but there is a need for program managers and other acquisition leaders to invite GenNet to the table—and sooner rather than later. Generational homogeneity is a less-than-optimal approach for this kind of innovative technical work. Seasoned graybeards and fresh-faced no-beards need to stand shoulder to shoulder because both generations could learn from each other.

Been There, Done That

One of the primary challenges faced by the DoD in general—and the intelligence community in particular—revolves around making the right information available to the right people and doing so quickly, easily, securely, and inexpensively. Who better to tackle this problem than the generation that has already (by and large) solved it? It makes very little sense to gather a room full of 50-year-olds and ask them to chart a course for establishing robust online collaboration capabilities. In the particular case mentioned earlier, the group ended up discussing whether or not one can effectively collaborate with a person whose face you do not know—and frankly it was not much of a discussion.

The GenNet crew understands how online collaboration works because they have done it for years. In fact, they have never *not* done it. They text, they blog, they IM, they have netfriends they've never met. It's the only life they know. Text messages from water dishes are not a big deal in their world. When GenNet enters the DoD in force, they are going to change it radically, particularly as they rise in stature and rank. And this is precisely the kind of change we so desperately need in this post-9/11 world.

Culture Change 101

The conference participants also discussed the need to change the intelligence community's culture and the DoD

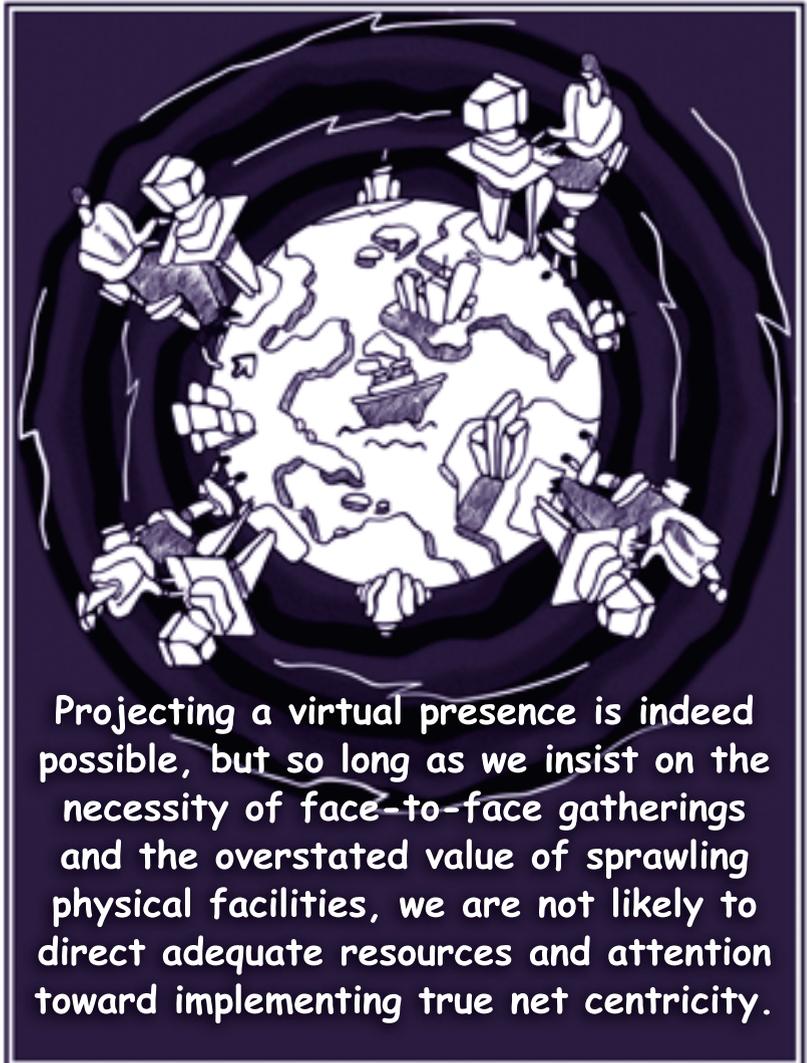
in general, moving them towards net centrality and collaborative relationships. The proposed mechanism for instituting this sea change was by means of an edict (another absurd idea that was laughed at by no one). I can't imagine what made them think that approach would work. Significant culture change in the direction of net centrality is indeed coming, but not because someone at the top decided to proclaim "Thou Shalt Change Thy Culture." Change is coming because a new generation is coming, an online, well-connected, network-centric generation. As Howard Rheingold observed in his book *Smart Mobs*, "The Web spread by infection, not fiat." A well-connected, network-oriented generation is going to make sure nothing stays the same. And in my opinion, it can't happen soon enough.

What is this change going to look like? For one, the DoD and the intelligence community are going to function much more like a *community* than they do today. One workshop participant pointed out that many people within the IC don't want to share data and products because their professional identity has long been one of Keeper of the Data. From their perspective, sharing data threatens their sense of job security. In contrast, GenNet members intuitively understand that interoperability, openness, and sharing are what provide the most value in the first place. Ultimately, *not* sharing is what threatens job security, so Data Keepers and other Defenders of the Status Quo should beware as GenNet arrives.

All Aboard The Cluetrain Express

Many logjams, rice bowls, and stovepipes of today are not going to survive the first wave of GenNet, let alone the waves that follow. Hyperlinks do indeed subvert hierarchy, as *The Cluetrain Manifesto* proclaimed, which is a short way of saying that direct connections to people and data will obviate the need for (and disrupt the function of) official communication channels and other formalized structures designed to limit access to people and data. All the red tape and all the delays won't go away, but they will indeed be subverted—and that is a good thing.

At that conference, we also heard about a particular organization that is building an enormous war-room facility where lots of people can physically come together in the same place. What they probably *should* be working on is a system that allows people to work together *as if* they were in the same physical location, without leaving their current duty stations. Projecting a virtual presence



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GenNet can help us change that once they get in the door. And they will get in the door sooner or later. We need them sooner, so let's make sure we don't stand in the way.

By the way, did you notice I used some acronyms and jargon without defining them? If they puzzled you, now would be the time to start getting with the GenNet program.

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