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Ron Chepesiuk interviews John Perry Barlow of Grateful Dead and Electronic Frontier Foundation fame

Ron Chepesiuk

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Against the Grain

"Linking Publishers, Vendors and Librarians"

Interview with John Perry Barlow on The Future of the Information Age

by Ron Chepesiuk <104551.2330@compuserve.com>

In the past quarter century, with the advent of electronic communications systems, Mankind has begun to enter the post industrial age. For good or ill, the new ways of producing and processing information is shaping the politics and economics of the post industrial age and the way citizens and communities function and interact. It is also reshaping the ways librarians, vendors and publishers do their jobs and serve their clients.

During the 1990s, John Perry Barlow, the 47-year old Grateful Dead lyricist and former rancher from Pinedale, Wyoming, has become one of the most outspoken and interesting thinkers on the subject of the emerging Information Age and the place of the individual and community in the radically new world information technology is creating. Barlow skyrocketed to fame in 1990 when he co-founded the **Electronic Frontier Foundation**, which has been described as "cyberspace's first civil liberties organization." Barlow became alarmed about government intrusion into cyberspace after FBI agents visited him in their search for hackers. Since then, Barlow has been an activist against efforts to censor the Internet.

As a speaker, he travels the world presenting his views on what he sees as "the

fundamental shift" taking place in world civilization. It's a shift he sees threatening authority worldwide and altering the way we work, think, and spend our leisure time. Barlow also sees the shift affecting issues of concern to librarians, vendors, and publishers, such as copyright, censorship, and the role of government in the Information Age.

John Perry Barlow's metaphorical pronouncements have been described as "psychobabble" and his many followers as "the Branch Davidians of Cyberspace." Barlow maintains that he not trying to be a seer — one who has all the answers to the great changes of the post-industrial era. "Let me tell you what I do for a living these days," Barlow told Harper's magazine recently. "I go around telling people that something really weird is happening. Some fundamental shift is taking place that will have many consequences so that collectively we can make the little decisions that need to be made. I don't say these changes are good. I certainly don't claim we're creating an utopia." To understand these changes and what they might mean for us, I met with John Perry Barlow for two lengthy interviews in the past six months. Here are some of the thoughts and insights Barlow had to share with us. — RC

ATG: You speak to a lot of library groups. Do you use libraries yourself a lot?

JPB: Yes, I do, but I've never been as good about libraries as I should be. My kids
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If Rumors Were Horses

1997 has begun with lots of "people rumors." Here are a few of them.

Barbara Dean — the truly magnificent, hard-working, warm, and wonderful librarian who loves acquisitions to top it all off —

has taken the position of Head of Acquisitions at **Arlington County Public Library**. Congratulations, Barbara, and hooray!

And the truth is — **John Laraway** has
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use libraries and I've trained them to think of libraries as a resource as fundamental as the grocery store or any other major outlet. As a kid, though, I was never a big library user because I live in rural Wyoming and I was always a long way off from the library in Pinedale. I really didn't start to use libraries until I was in college.

ATG: *How would you describe your library in Pinedale?*

JPB: For the size of the town, it's a great library and the folks who work in it are the kind of librarians who will make someone a strong advocate for libraries.

ATG: *Has the Internet reached it?*

JPB: Yes, it certainly has and I've been doing my best to help people to log onto the Internet from elsewhere in the community. But I come from a state where the motto is "if it's not broke, don't fix it" (laughs). So sometimes it's kind of hard to get anything done in Wyoming.

ATG: *I understand from my background reading that you not been involved with information technology for a very long time.*

JPB: I never touched a computer until 1988 or '89. I've always been a gearhead and somewhat of a hot rodder. I was a rancher for 17 years, so I spent a lot of my time working with physical objects. I never did have a great affinity for information technology, but several things happened at once. I began to think about what was going to happen to community in the absence of agriculture and what I was going to do, given the direction American agriculture was headed. I realized I was trying to be a rancher at the end of what **Alvin Toffler** called the "First Wave." Agriculture would be coming to an end in my lifetime. I never had any infinity for the second age. I found what the industrial period had wrought in terms of the human condition and human experience to be appalling. Then I discovered cyberspace and began to think that, if I was going to have to get out of one economic epoch, I could leap over the second and into the third. It would be very difficult for someone to make that shift, if they had worked as an interchangeable part in some factory or office cubicle all their lives, or had been told initiative is dangerous, or that if you speak your mind, you won't be able to stay on the pension plan.

ATG: *The Dead Heads, the devoted followers of the Grateful Dead, had some-*

thing to do with your interest in cyberspace, didn't they?

JPB: The Deadheads were among the first users of the Internet. The way I began to think about community — a community not focused on a small agricultural town somewhere — can largely be attributed to my association with the Deadheads. The Internet — more specifically a bulletin board on the Internet known as The Well — had played a big role in developing their strong sense of community. I got on The Well looking for the community of Deadheads. I found them, but I also found something that felt like a small community to me and I became a member of that community.

ATG: *As you are aware, many social critics question whether community can happen in cyberspace. They say that it is actually anti-community.*

JPB: We have a terrible disease of literal mindness in this society. For many social critics of the Information Age, it's either/or. Something has to be totally good or totally bad. I'm the kind of guy who believes there is a lot of color in the spectrum. Obviously, the virtual community does not have many of the characteristics of what I would consider to be real community.

ATG: *Like what specifically?*

JPB: A real community tends to have a sense of shared adversity. That's part of what creates it in the first place. Sharing email isn't quite like being poor or having to suffer bad weather. Moreover, it's hard — much harder — to leave a real community than it is a virtual one. Often, you're stuck in a real community. So, yes, there are all these kinds of things, but what I find most interesting is the border condition that operates between the virtual and the physical worlds. I believe there are a lot of communities now — and the number is increasing — which use both dimensions to strengthen one another. The Well is a case in point. It's a virtual community, but it got people to eventually meet face to face. Those Deadheads became good friends, many of those people wouldn't have had any real community were it not for the Well. The Well created a meeting space where they could come together.

ATG: *So do you give much credence to the views of the so called neo-Luddites who adamantly are opposed to high tech and see it destroying community, not building it.*

JPB: Oh, I think they are silly. They are not against high tech, they are against

technology that was created after they turned 25 years old. I bet you most of them have an answering machine, a telephone, a refrigerator. If they were really serious about their lives, their lifestyles would be more basic ... more loin cloth.

ATG: *But given the pervasiveness of technology in our society isn't it just as silly to expect them to wear loin cloths and live a primitive lifestyle. In order to exist and function in this high-tech pervasive world, compromises have to be made.*

JPB: Yeah, they say that, but don't get me wrong. There are certain things I agree with them on completely. For one thing, they hate television and so do I. I think television is the worse thing that has ever happened to society. But I think the neo-Luddites have to be more critical of the media than they have been. They don't draw a distinction between television and the great conversation about what is going on in cyberspace because there happens to be a cathode tube involved with both. They don't take the time to go there and find out what it actually is like. It's kind of hard to respect that position.

ATG: *There are lot of people, including librarians, out there, though, who aren't necessarily neo-Luddites and don't hate technology, but don't see any point or great need to hookup to cyberspace.*

JPB: I certainly wouldn't insist that they do. I'm pro-choice. Anybody can set their own adjustments with regard to how much of this stuff they want to interact with.

ATG: *And if they decide not to interact, will they become failures?*

JPB: That's like saying a Trappist monk is somehow a failure. I think everybody is connected on some level or another. It's just a matter of how they want to characterize that connection.

ATG: *But you do see a fundamental shift taking place in world civilization, a profound shift much like what happened when we moved from the Agricultural Age to the Industrial Age.*

JPB: I honestly believe humanity is now in one of the great movements of discontinuity in history that is perhaps more profound and more earth shaking in terms of what it means to be human than anything since the capture of fire. It's being made possible by the development of the Internet and the increasing pervasiveness of communication between computer networks. I know there has been a lot said

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for and against developments in cyberspace. I don't say the changes that are happening are good. I certainly don't claim we are creating an utopia. But I think to characterize this shift as a good or bad thing at this point is to trivialize its importance. That shift is coming, whether we like it or not.

ATG: *Isn't it kind of rash to compare the significance of the capture of fire to the emergence of the Internet. After all, the Internet is only twenty-five years old and it has only really caught on with the public in the last two or three years. Furthermore, there are a lot of problems and questions to be worked out.*

JPB: I'm just saying that, as far as I can tell, the Internet is an enormously powerful force that is propelling us in that direction. The Internet has been doubling in size since 1968 and that pace has not slackened. If it continues to grow at that pace, every man, woman and child on the planet will have an email address by year 2003. I'm not saying that will happen for sure, but something is happening and it's pretty basic. People are using the Internet as a tool so much of their time that they are not even aware of it.

ATG: *You have your admirers, but your willingness to stick your neck out in terms of your opinions on how you see the future has meant that you have lot of critics, too. One critic called your bold pronouncements "psychobabble," and another has referred to you and your followers as the "David Karesh and Branch Davidians of cyberspace."*

JPB: My objective is to get people to think about the forces of change at work and to make them more aware of how significant they are. My whole purpose in life now is to get people to rearrange the mental furniture of their minds so they can see things more clearly. Yeah, I'm hyperbolic. One of my colleagues said I needed a "hyperbolectomy."

ATG: *I always thought you were a soft spoken cowboy from Wyoming (laughs).*

JPB: (Laughs) Yeah, yeah, but I think there is a strategic advantage to hyperbole, especially if you are trying to get people's attention. I say a lot of what I have to say in metaphor because metaphor is the geography of cyberspace, and, if my geographical descriptions seem a little large, it's because I think cyberspace is a large place and people have to open their minds in order to experience its dimensions. That's what I'm trying to do.

ATG: *Getting back to the "fundamental shift." Could you describe how that shift is taking place?*

JPB: The development of cyberspace is leading to a new kind of social arrangement that doesn't have much to do with existing national boundaries on this planet. This is problematic for practically every basis of power that has accumulated itself over the last 250 years and in some cases, even longer. The way in which power had worked on the Planet Earth is for some authority somewhere to do something to somebody. Your body was within the jurisdiction of power, which was being exercised by a king or government or some sort of entity like that functioning within the nation state, and, could stop you — kill you or put you out of circulation — that is, do something to your body. The human race is moving into an environment where it's not going to have a "body," that is, a jurisdiction, and no existing government is prepared for this development. They are trying to act and control things in the face of something they do not understand.

ATG: *Could you give an example?*

JPB: We have the U.S. Congress doing things like pass the Communications

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Decency Act last February (1996), which declares it unlawful for any American to distribute so called "indecent" material to minors over the Internet, and it makes violators subject to a fine of \$250,000 and imprisonment of up to two years. That is ridiculous! It amounts to government by the clueless over a place that most members of Congress have never been. There is going to be a lot more of this kind of censorship of things that were big enough for an economy of scale of poor people around the belly of the planet who are capable of doing as much intellectual work as anybody in the north. I honestly believe that in a hundred years the world is going to be worried about what to do with those poor brittle people in the north who still can't get it.

ATG: *If the scenario you sketched is accurate, I would imagine the discontinuity and inevitable disruption is going to cause a lot of pain.*

JPB: You see it already. **Pat Buchanan** has a lot of support because people in the U.S. feel that they are being swept aside by historical forces. There was a huge amount of pain the last time we went through one of these shifts. Look at what happened when we went from the agricultural to the industrial age. We had manifestations like that in America and attempts at control because every existing power relationship on the face of the Earth is going to be thrown up for grabs and authority everywhere is going to try to keep its power by force because it will no longer be able to do so by consensus. It's going to try to force itself on a environment or medium where imposition is no longer possible.

ATG: *If, as you say, "every kind of power relationship is going to be thrown up for grabs," does the nation state, as now exists, have a future?*

JPB: There were no nation states as we know them until about 1650, and they really rose to dominance in the nineteenth century. They rose as the Industrial Age developed and they will go down as the Industrial Age ends. I think the nation state is a doomed proposition. I don't think there will be a nation state left on the face of the Earth in the next fifty years. There will be ceremonial nation states. You see it happening now. In terms of what decisions get made on this planet, less and less of them have to do with existing national governments. For good or bad, those decisions are being made by large corporations, international and regional organiza-

tions like NAFTA and the European Union, and local entities of one sort or another. Increasingly, most entities of practical power pay less and less attention to government. They look at government as a problem, not as an attribute.

I look to see the biggest renaissance for the city state since the European Renaissance. The city state is one of the few areas of government that we actually need. You need a city government to clean the snow off the streets, to put cops on the street to protect its citizens, and to provide other types of real services. The nation state arose to define an economic zone with a currency, legal system, a trading arrangement, a transportation system, and all those kinds of civil war, which was really war between industry and agriculture, and thousands of people were killed.

ATG: *For many people — including, I'm sure many of our readers — there is a lot to hate about what is changing or might change. For example, there is much talk about the end of the library as we know it and how digital material is going to replace the book. Many people love books and believe the library is just fine the way it is. So do you see much of a future for the traditional library that includes physical space?*

JPB: I'm not in favor of giving it up [paper-based materials] overnight. I do know that a lot of people do need books and they don't want to give them up.

ATG: *But a lot of information is only in books. In fact, it's still overwhelmingly in books.*

JPB: That's right and you have to go on producing information in the form that it is available in.

ATG: *Another point — doesn't text allow for more imagination than digital media?*

JPB: Yes, that's absolutely true. The wonderful thing about poetry is that so much can be said with so little. I certainly would not want to do away with that. But, as I've said, when I talk about these things, I find many Americans and people in the West in general are afflicted with the disease of literal mindedness. We are so deeply in the grip of [French philosopher Rene] Descartes that we cannot think in any other terms except either/or. It's either text or some kind of pagan babble. I'm looking for a world where we incorporate all the tools we have and that includes plenty of text.

ATG: *But there's something else that's important here. Isn't there a danger of the*

world developing into two divisions: those who are becoming like the Mandarins of ancient China, having the expertise and know how to access the technology and using it to provide the information that gives them power, and those who, for a variety of reasons... disposition, money, location... can't. I'm talking about an emerging disparity between those who have the means to get access and use to information and those, who because of a variety of reasons — social, economic political, etc. — can't.

JPB: I'm getting more optimistic about the answer to this question. I believe diversity — gender, racial, economic — will come to cyberspace. I see more heterogeneous populations coming online and that's happened very quickly. The gender demographic is particularly noticeable. When I first got on the Internet, its users consisted primarily of white guys who can't dance. I thought: this is a drag. This is not a place I want to be. Now, however, that doesn't seem to be the case anymore.

ATG: *But how can you tell who's out there in cyberspace, given the anarchistic nature of the Internet?*

JPB: You really can't for sure, but let's compare two polls: an independent Roper poll taken about two-and-half years ago and another one taken a year-and-a-half ago. In that length of time, the number of women getting on the Internet in the U.S. had gone from seven percent to 37 percent. I really believe that by the Millennium there will be more women than men on the Internet because it is an inherently feminine environment. It is made entirely out of relationships where there is no heavy lifting and you can't use physical force. Who has the advantage?

ATG: *So what does that mean for the future of cyberspace?*

JPB: It means that, if government stays out of the way, cyberspace is going to have an environment that works on the basis of consensus rather than dominance.

ATG: *Does the future of cyberspace have any significance for the relationship of the sexes?*

JPB: It's definitely going to empower those of the sexes who are congenial to that kind of approach.

ATG: *Isn't there a danger of an imperialism evolving in cyberspace similar to what happened in the Industrial Age. Won't it follow that the West has the wealth and technology and so will rise to*
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political and economic dominance, or, more accurately, continue its dominance.

JPB: Not necessarily, if you look carefully at what happened in the industrial period. It was the northern Europeans who had a syncretic time-based culture that was naturally conducive to allowing itself to be turned into machinery. If you are punctual by cultural nature you don't mind being an interchangeable part in a large organization. But most everybody else on the planet suffered because they had a completely different view of the nature of time. As we get deeper into the Information Age, time will be irrelevant.

ATG: Do you see a role for publishers in the Age of Information?

JPB: There is some role for publishers. I'm not saying they are going to go away. But what publishers continue to do is to put human thought in a physical format and ship it around in trucks to a place where it is put on a shelf where somebody buys it as if it were some kind of mercantile object. You don't need to do that anymore. It's now possible to take anything that a human

being can do with his or her mind and reproduce it infinitely and distribute it infinitely at zero cost. That is going to make for a big shift, so publishers will have to reexamine their role in the information age. I've talked to publishers about where their future lies. They aren't doomed. They just have to think a lot about what they do that is still going to be useful.

ATG: So how would you characterize the role of the librarian in all this? Should we be anxious or is it an exciting time to be a librarian.

JPB: Oh, definitely, yes...an exciting time because people are going to need librarians more than ever. In the future, people are going to have to use libraries more and more for economic reasons, not just for personal enrichment. Libraries are going to be much more central because people are going to be making money on the basis of what librarians can do for them. You are going to be essential to them.

Ron Chepesiuk is Special Collections Librarian at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, SC. He is also the author of six books and 1,200 plus articles that have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Progressive*, *Modern Maturity*, *USA Today*, and more than 200 other publications.

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will go on for some time, as there does not seem to be an answer in sight. Who is going to create and maintain the digital archives of the future? Are publishers going to do that? Would you trust us to do it? Elsevier recognizes that it's vital that an archive be maintained and will ensure that there is an appropriate archival home for our electronic material. Will we be the one to do that archive? I honestly don't know yet. Libraries...governments...it's not clear yet. It is expensive to archive and to continually refresh files as technologies change. How is it going to be paid for?

Once you even decide all of that, there are still issues relating to access to the archive — how can it be used? Publishers and librarians had some wonderful theological discussions last year as to whether things on paper could be scanned and put into a digital archive. And the publishers didn't have — surprising as it may seem — too much problem with the notion of scanning for preservation — so long as no one had access to it after it was scanned!

Not surprisingly, that notion didn't fly with librarians.

The other issue here is to ask what the definitive edition is, anyway. I said earlier that we're creating these non-printable items. There will be an increasing divergence between the paper and electronic versions of a journal. We have a new journal called *New Astronomy*. It's got video and it's wonderful. It comes out first electronically, then there will be a paper version, but they're not going to be the same, and that's true of other journals from other publishers.

12. Where Is the Money Going to Come From?

We can ask now the last question: where is the money going to come from? We know that budgets are more than strained. We also know what it costs on our side and it costs a lot to get this stuff up and ready for electronic access. There is so much more technically possible now than we have the money to do, so we're having to make choices all the time. And I mean the whole community. Which means we need to set priorities, and the process

of setting priorities is not clear to me. I don't think the dialog that needs to occur between the libraries, the agents and the publishers (and the students, faculty and administration) about where we should spend an increasingly finite set of dollars is taking place. How do we collectively decide on what is the highest priority? If there is a way we can do that, it desperately needs to go on, because each of us now is operating independently.

IN CONCLUSION...

So in the end what I worry about is: are we too early because we're building a very complicated system? Or are we too late because too much has already happened in other ways and maybe we're overbuilding? Are we simply misdirected? Or we doing things just about right and on the correct path? All of the above...none of the above...and then I get to the point I ask, what was the question again?

Which leads me to ask you to count with me. One sheep, two sheep, a third sheep — oops, here comes a goat, two cats, three donkeys and an elephant. Rats, I'm still wide awake.

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Jack replied, "He hadn't been making all of his house payments on time. I just got the bank to threaten foreclosure and he was more than willing to take Angela's offer."

4. **The Plight of Libraries Programs.** "I thought I would save the best to the last, I just hired an old friend from the Firm. Got himself a nice job at Princeton to help libraries. He has given a bunch of papers and writes articles about the money problems facing libraries. He is going to get the college presidents' association to agree to a uniform percent of their total budgets so that libraries can get their periodicals budgets back where they need to be." And he added with

a smile, "back to where we think they should be."

Alfred was impressed, but asked "But what about Chuck? It won't take him long to get on to you and we can't afford to take any heat on any of this." Jack got more serious and said simply, "Chuck is out of hand, but you don't need to worry about him." Alfred motioned with his hand and the expression on his face that he had heard that before: "That is what you said when he was supposed to take early retirement." Jack replied, "The twit turned it down. He doesn't seem to have a life beyond the library." Alfred looked him in the eyes and said "Well, the problem is yours, take care of it before our next meeting."

(More in next year's ATG annual issue)