Spring 4-1-1997

Internet Politics and Cyberparties: Revolutionizing American Democracy

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INTERNET POLITICS AND CYBERPARTIES: REVOLUTIONIZING AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

A THESIS FOR THE HONORS PROGRAM

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Spring 1997

APPROVED BY

4/28/97

4/28/97

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ABSTRACT

The American political system is characterized by its two-party structure. However, apparently American faith in the status-quo democracy is faltering. With advancing technology, Americans are gaining greater access to political information, and tools such as the Internet are proving to be useful and versatile in the political arena. The elections of this decade have already been touched by the effects of the Internet, and groups such as the revolutionary cyberparties show promise of reshaping the party politics in this country. The current two-party system is in jeopardy of being replaced by one that is more democratic.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to offer my deepest appreciation to those who have supported me throughout this project. First of all, I would like to thank Dr. Steve Boilard whose insight and inspiration were true motivations for both completing this thesis and surviving to witness graduation. I wish to also acknowledge Dr. Walker Rutledge for his uncommon patience and for the extreme amount of care and attention given to creating and refining this final product. Dr. Sam McFarland also deserves much thanks for allowing me the opportunity to engage in such a work. I owe each of these professors my utmost gratitude, for without their guidance and support, this thesis would not exist.

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INTRODUCTION

In his article "The Net and the Future of Politics: The Ascendancy of the Commons," Michael Hauben comments that "The Internet offers a chance for us to follow through on a promise of democracy that was betrayed over two hundred years ago" (1996). It is his opinion that the American Constitution was designed to prevent citizen intervention in governmental affairs. However, he argues, such technical innovations as the Internet threaten to destroy the current top-down model (created by a few for mass-consumption) of information distribution and will eventually make moving toward a true participatory democracy more plausible.

Throughout American history, the "town meeting" has been seen as the premier example of "direct democracy." In these small, but active, groups common citizens organize to discuss political issues and to formulate their demands upon government. Today, the Internet can be regarded as an electronic town meeting, encompassing citizens of the entire globe. The Net allows for a meeting of minds which transcends race, geography, and wealth.

Whether or not direct democracy is the preferable form of government, Hauben makes a strong argument for expanding the Internet infrastructure in order to offer access

to those from all walks of life. In his words, "...The question is...whether we as a society could afford being split into two distinct societies - those online and those not" (1996). This statement is insightful in that it recognizes the danger in having a stratification between those who are highly informed and politically involved and those who are ill-informed and alienated from the political process.

The most common and effectual method of participating in the governance of this country is through the political party. Political parties have the power to organize memberships, form governments, and shape policy. The two American mainstream parties, the Republican and Democratic parties, have served as the backbone of the American electoral system for over two centuries. And although few foresee the destruction of the American two-party system any time soon, many argue that the status-quo democracy that this system has created *is* in jeopardy. There are certain factors which have led to the alienation and apathy of a large part of the United States citizenry responsible for committing themselves to the preservation of democracy. A representative mass of U.S. citizens do not vote in elections or participate in any way in political activity.

It was Thomas Jefferson who first recommended that public education was a necessity of a healthy democracy (Hauben, 1996). It is a widely accepted belief that citizens must be informed and able to contribute to the governing of the country. The Internet follows in the great tradition of other public institutions such as the public library or the public school system. These institutions were established to serve the general populace. The Internet creates grassroots connections which allow the excluded sections of society to have a voice and to have access to otherwise unattainable information.

The effects of this liberation of information can be easily seen in the newly evolved cyberparties. These political parties, organizing over the Internet, are paving the way for a new democracy. Discontent with the current two-party hegemony, these groups are hoping to change the way Americans view the role of government and political parties, abolish the barriers imposed on third/minor parties, and to revolutionize the voting process.

This early in the development of the Internet, it is impossible to predict how profound its influence will be. However, one thing is certain: Internet access among the American population has been doubling every year since 1988. With this kind of information proliferation, people are educating themselves, organizing themselves, and are forcing the government to become more responsible. This will surely affect the types of public-policy decisions which are made. If not, there are groups such as the cyberparties who promise to listen to the "voice of the common man," thereby endangering the fundamental two-party system in this country. Either way, the general population seems to benefit from this revolutionary communications technology.

THE POLITICAL PARTY: DEFINITION AND DEVELOPMENT

The United States of America was the first modern electoral democracy, and it was here that the first political parties developed around the beginning of the 19th century. Before this, important public offices were filled by means of appointments, primogeniture, and even bribery. With the introduction of democracy, political offices were not to be gained by such arbitrary measures, but candidates were elected by the people from which their authority was democratically ordained. Political hopefuls were now at the mercy of the electorate. In order to amass support from the public, politicians in this new democracy saw that some sort of club or organization that bound them with large numbers of voters would help them to attain and hold office. Thus, the political party was born out of these self-serving political desires (Lawson, 1993, p. 197).

According to Lawson, "a political party is a group of officials or would-be officials who are linked with a sizable group of citizens into an organization; a chief object of this organization is to ensure that its officials attain power or are maintained in power" (1993, pp. 197-198). The two mainstream political parties in the United States, the Republican and Democratic parties, fit comfortably within the parameters of this

definition. The desire for political power was the foundation of party formation and is still a fundamental aspiration of these parties.

The above definition is much too simplistic because the political party has evolved into something much more than a power relationship with the public. It has become a versatile tool in the modern world of politics. According to Lawson, parties provide all of the following: a basis for the mobilization of masses of citizens, a means of recruiting and socializing political leaders, a method of control within the government structure, and a political identity (1993, p. 201).

Political parties serve the vital electoral function of winning voters over to their cause and prompting them to serve the party by casting their votes. In order to win elections, political parties work very hard and pay great deals of money to "get out the vote." Political parties also mobilize the public in times of national crisis, civil unrest, or opposition to the party in power.

Parties also lend themselves in recruiting and molding political leaders. Those interested in becoming career politicians have traditionally joined a party at a young age and worked the ranks within the party. Political nominations and appointments are often made by party leaders who select candidates based on their prior involvement within the party.

An unforeseen effect of political parties was the emergence of the organization as a channel of control. In controlling other political officials, party leaders induce obedience in legislative votes by offering lesser-known party figures the chance to advance to more powerful positions within the party.

Finally, for those who become active, the political party may become a vital and personal source of identity.

> One important thing about party as a source of identity is that it can provide continuity in a political world that is otherwise quite fluid. Candidates come and go, wars start and end, political issues arise and fade and are replaced by others, but parties may go on and on and on (Lawson, 1993, p. 201).

In the United States, the Democratic and Republican parties are both over a century old. By providing politically active people with lasting political identities, these parties have been successful at providing political continuity across generations.

It is imperative to note that theories have been suggested concerning party functions other than the ones listed above. These are just a few of the common roles that parties have traditionally chosen to serve. Bardes et. al. view the party as a source of "responsibility for operating the government" and as an "organized opposition to the party in power" (1994, p. 234). Because of discrepancies in party-function theories, it can be deduced that the functions of a party are not what *define* the term *political party*.

For over a century, theorists have tried to define precisely and objectively *political party*. Textbook definitions, such as the one cited previously, succeed in providing an elementary generalization of political parties based primarily on facts about the two mainstream parties. However, by ignoring other party alternatives, one cannot construct a valid, comprehensive definition. Function is a concern of party organizations when determining what purpose the party wishes to serve within government, society, and its membership. Thus, before a party performs any function, it has already defined itself as a party. A political party, therefore, is in the generalist sense an organization of

common political interest and opinion which has proclaimed itself a political party under a shared name.

Stasiology, the study of political parties, has developed immensely over the last century. The most influential studies of the twentieth century in the field of *stasiology* were performed by French sociologist Maurice Duverger. In a foreword to *Political Parties*, D.W. Brogan explains Duverger's work in defining political parties of the twentieth century: "[The modern party system]...is a twentieth-century mechanism designed to solve the problem of how to bring 'the people,' the new mass voters, into the political community" (Duverger, 1976, p. viii).

Duverger was of the opinion that, thanks to universal suffrage, the primary function of political parties is to ensure democracy in political systems by providing voters a place in politics. He approached the party system by first attempting to define an individual party member. The term, in his opinion, certainly means different things to different parties (1976, p. 4).

Duverger described political parties in the United States as *cadre parties*. These parties are characterized by small, loosely affiliated memberships, an elite leadership with limited control over the base of supporters, and weak communication links. In Europe, Duverger identified much different types of parties, which he termed *mass parties*. Mass parties are characterized by their "large, dues-paying memberships, centralized, bureaucratic leadership, and strong communication links running throughout the organization..." (Lawson, 1993, p. 278).

There are several basic differences between these two party genres. First of all, American parties concentrate on winning elections rather than signing up large numbers

of deeply committed dues-paying members who believe passionately in the party's programs. Also, political identity is much more important in the political cultures of mass parties partly because of the fundamentals of the parliamentary system and proportional representation. In this governmental system, the electorate votes for a particular party instead of an individual. As a result, political officials are expected to vote with the party in nearly all policy-making decisions. This party loyalty contrasts greatly with that found in the cadre parties of the United States. Because candidates are elected individually, party members will often "toe the party line" and vote independently of the party.

Duverger criticized cadre parties because of their centralized power bases and lacking membership loyalty. He believed this lent itself to corruption and would further alienate a large part of the electorate. He blatantly attacked American parties as having "no meaning at all...one can only enumerate the militants who are part of the 'machine,' the supporters who reinforce it during election campaigns, the people who take part in 'primaries,' and the citizens who vote for the party" (1976, p. 61). Among the functions of political parties described earlier was their capacity for providing members with a source of political identity. According to Duverger, this vital need was not being addressed by American parties.

In the United States, the suitability of the American two-party system has been under attack for some time now. Because of the convergence of ideologies, many voters fail to see a difference in the two mainstream parties. Ideological lines have been blurred in order to attract the mass of voters who place themselves in the middle of the political

spectrum. Ironically, instead of appealing to more voters, the majority of the electorate has become disinterested, even disgusted.

According to 1996 Presidential candidate John Hagelin of the Natural Law Party, 90 million people who are eligible to vote will not do so because of their lack of support for either of the two mainstream parties ("Natural Law Party," 1996). The two-party system is very much embedded in the political culture of this country, and it does not seem likely that there will ever be any danger to its existence. However, because of these political traditions, we are "inclined to ignore the novelty of much or most of our party habits and so fail to see what are the true novelties, the true possibilities and the true dangers of our present party system" (Duverger, 1976, p. viii).

Although there are a variety of alternative parties, most voters see the protest vote as a wasted vote; therefore, a large part of the electorate sacrifices its voice in government by refusing to take part in the established party duel. D.W. Brogan states,

> For to bring the masses into the political system means to encourage parties that are not mere aggregates of local and personal interests, but parties that give or profess to give to the man in the street a voice in politics that he cannot have if all he is given as a political choice is between one group of notables and another (Duverger, 1976, p. xiii).

The third-party phenomenon, once a controversial issue among party theorists, has earned respect and gained momentum, within the past twenty years especially. Although third parties have been in existence since the beginning of American electoral democracy, these groups operate in a system with a wide range of social, economic, and legal barriers that inhibit their growth, influence, and success. Throughout history, most have been short-lived and not very successful outside of local/grassroots campaigns (Mazmanian, 1974, p. 3).

The Federal Election Commission (FEC), which regulates presidential elections, defines a third/minor party solely in terms of voter strength. According to the FEC, a third/minor party is any party that has received between five and twenty-five percent of the popular vote in the preceding presidential elections (Hazlett, 1992, p. 14). Because of their lack of success at the polls, these groups are dismissed by many theorists as ineffectual and unimportant. One such theorist, William Goldman, fails to acknowledge third parties because they don't meet his criterion for what defines a true political party -- electoral success. Instead, Goldman labels these groups as "agitational associations, debating societies, or educational organizations" (Hazlett, 1992, p. 15). Today, however, with several well-established third parties such as the Reform and Libertarian Parties, third parties are gaining respect as viable party organizations. More and more candidates are being elected to local and state offices, and memberships are growing stronger and more active. For example, the number of dues-paying Libertarian Party members has nearly doubled to 20,000 people in the last three years (Schmitt, 1996, p. 9). [For more information concerning third-party memberships and offices held in 1996, see Appendices A and B.]

With no chance of defeating either of the two mainstream candidates, why do third-party candidates even run for political office? Most third-party leaders claim that it is to make a point and to build momentum for the next election (Schmitt, 1996, p. 9). These candidates see themselves as part of a much bigger political role. Their goal is to represent the views of their organization and to persuade the American people and the government that their agendas should be addressed.

Throughout American electoral history, third parties have presented ideas that sometimes seemed unthinkable but nevertheless sometimes take hold. For example, in 1840 the Liberty Party called for the abolition of slavery, and in the early 1900's the Prohibition Party platform prompted the government to action. Ross Perot in 1992, running as an independent, captured nineteen percent of the popular vote and forced the major party candidates to address balancing the budget (Schmitt, 1996, p. 9). Getting their issues addressed is the primary *raison d'être* of most third parties. These groups almost always organize in response to a specific issue which they feel is not being addressed. Judging from past elections, one may conclude that third parties have succeeded in shaping policy agendas using these tactics.

The third-party movement is still small and has many skeptics. However, their appeal is real and growing. This trend will undoubtedly be nurtured by the ever-evolving technological drift.

INTERNET POLITICS: THE NEXT AMERICAN REVOLUTION?

Within the last seventy years, there have been important changes in the party systems of several countries in the western world. There have been two distinct revolutions in party structure, both taking place in Europe. The first was the Socialist revolution, which swept the continent between 1890 and 1900. The second, taking place between 1925 and 1930, was the simultaneous movements of the Communists in Eastern Europe and the Fascists' rise to power in Italy. Each of these party revolutions was significant because it symbolized the desire of the electorate to organize as a reaction to political and/or socio-economic conditions present in the society in which they lived (Duverger, 1976, p. 4).

The fundamental premise of political revolution is the idea of "unaccommodated interests." These are issues, affecting a proportion of the population, which the public feels is not being addressed by government. These sentiments rarely dissipate, and the means used by the people who hold them to seek satisfaction are likely to grow progressively more disruptive to the entire political system (Lawson, 1993, p. 286).

Although the United States has, so far, remained immune to such a party revolution, a technological breakthrough in communication, the Internet, is creating new

trends in political behavior. Common citizens are taking it upon themselves to learn about the issues, to share their own opinions, and even to organize their own political parties via the Internet.

The first signs of the Internet's being used for political purpose were first seen during the 1992 election, but 1996 was the breakthrough year for Internet politics. According to an article in the *Courier Journal* prior to the election, "The Internet - barely a blip on most political radar screens in 1992 - has become a major player in this year's campaign" (Manning, 1996, p. A1).

As in past elections, the media continue to play a vital role in campaign strategy. Radio and television have traditionally been the media of choice for running campaigns. In the 1992 election, for example, Ross Perot virtually ran his campaign from CNN's "Larry King Live"; in the 1996 election, thirty-minute-long commercials, called "infomercials," were his trademark.

According to Manning, the Internet has emerged as the new medium of choice. This breakthrough in communications technology has proven itself to be a valuable tool for political parties, activists, and ordinary people who are curious about issues, campaigns, and politics in general. Political parties on all levels are using the Internet to post candidates, party platforms, voting records, membership requirements, and electronic mail (e-mail) addresses for feedback.

A number of major claims have been put forward about how "the Net" may lead to a transformation of one sort or another in the nature of American democracy. The possible ramifications of political activity over the Internet are enormous, the greatest being that more people can get involved in the democratic process. Although Internet

technology must continue to evolve and expand if a major transformation is to take place, the foundation has been created. And even at this premature stage in the development of the Internet, the realm of politics is already being touched by its influences. Direct communication with public officials, electronic "town halls," and up-to-the-minute campaign information and election results are all services provided within the world of Internet politics.

HISTORY OF THE INTERNET AND ITS UNGOVERNABLE GROWTH

Where did the Internet come from? Almost ironically, it began as a government project. Beginning in the 1950s, Paul Baran of the RAND Corporation and his team of researchers developed a revolutionary computer system. This communications system was designed to be used by the government and the military during the threat of nuclear war. It was composed of several terminals without a central broadcasting or receiving site. This decentralization was critical because, in other hierarchical systems, a nuclear attack could destroy one node within the system and the destruction of this one node would lead to the shut-down of the entire communications system (Sterling, 1996).

In 1968, this communication networking project was placed in the hands of the U.S. Department of Defense under the care of their Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA). In 1969, ARPA created a linkage network by using phone cables to connect government supercomputers across the nation. In the first year of ARPANET, as it came to be called, there was only one node installed; within three years, there were over thirty. The network quickly grew in popularity in government and academic circles. ARPANET not only connected government supercomputers but also research institutions and educational centers. Researchers for the military, government, and universities used

ARPANET to share findings and other information. This network established the crude beginning of the Internet that exists today (Sterling, 1996).

The growth of ARPANET was so great that it eventually removed itself from operation in 1990 because the military was no longer a part of the network's survival. Other major developments were made in the area of computer-mediated communications such as the World Wide Web (WWW), created in 1992. Swiss physicist Tim Berners-Lee developed the World Wide Web as a mode of organizing his research into interlinking pages of information. These pages were linked by hypertext, highlighted text which allows the user to access other pages/sites of the WWW. Other groups adopted this system of organization and began to use the World Wide Web simply to explore on-line information.

Soon after the advent of the WWW, Web browsers, software designed to display pages, were created which let users take advantage of hypertext, added graphics, and sounds. Commands could be encoded by simply using keyboard characters or computer mouse buttons, which made the browsers easy to use. Advances in World-Wide-Web navigation, display, speed, and ease-of-use were vital to the Internet's growth. Information could be accessed quickly and easily, and the Internet became a medium usable by more people than just the computer elite. The price of computers has also decreased. Today, computers with sufficient power for Internet hook-up potential can be bought for less than $2,000, which makes them accessible to a mass of the U.S. population.

Undoubtedly, the Internet is growing in size, but it is nearly impossible to attain concrete data showing the total number of users or exact rate of growth:

> The Internet's pace of growth in the early 1990s is spectacular, almost ferocious. It is spreading faster than cellular phones, faster than fax machines. Last year [1992] the Internet was growing at a rate of twenty percent a month. The number of "host" machines with direct connection has been doubling every year since 1988 (Sterling, 1996).

A number of studies have been undertaken in an attempt to measure Internet growth and to discover more about the typical Internet user. Network Wizards, an Internet researching company, determined that "the Internet has doubled in size from 6.6 million hosts in mid-1995 to 12.8 million hosts in mid-1996 (a *host* is defined as a domain name that has an address associated with it - for example, mail.bigcorp.com)" (Kantor and Neubarth, 1996, p. 46). This is only the number of hosts; the number of individuals who actually use the Internet is impossible to determine. There are approximations of users, but the growth of the Internet is so rapid that by the time any results could be published, they would immediately be outdated. A recent survey undertaken by the Survey Research Center at the University of Maryland found that 26% of adults (about 51 million) in the United States had some sort of access to the Internet during the fall of 1996 at either home, school, or work. This figure does not take into account how frequently they use the Internet, only that they have access (Bimber, 1996). According to another survey by the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, 21% of public libraries in the U.S. are linked to the Internet. Studies show that this figure is growing exponentially monthly (Zakon, 1997). [For an organized chart of Internet growth, see Appendix C.]

The Internet has grown with such fury that the government which laid the foundation for its existence is now trying to find ways to control it. The information surge as a result of this technology has not been without its unique problems. The initial

reputation of the Internet as the "Information Superhighway" has lately been the target of swarms of attacks by critics who feel the Internet is the tool of pedophiles, terrorists, pornographers, and any other criminal who has access to a modem and an Internet Service Provider.

The government felt it necessary to deal with these protests and attempted to take action to regulate the technological chaos rampaging "cyberspace," the virtual world that exists within the Internet. The product of their deliberations was the Communications Decency Act. This bill, passed in the United States legislature in 1995, attempted to make "indecent" and "offensive" material on the Internet illegal. The bill was eventually declared unconstitutional by a federal panel and is now being considered in the Supreme Court (Zakon, 1997).

Although the Communications Decency Act in essence failed, government agencies continue to secretly monitor Internet activities, and numerous arrests have been made. In response, Internet activists, who demand free expression, have begun their own attack on the government. One such activist, John Perry Barlow, drafted a "Cyberspace Declaration of Independence." This document is posted solely on the Internet and has received a great deal of attention - over 5,000 people have signed it since he first posted it in February of 1996. Launched also has been a movement called "the Blue Ribbon Campaign," its goal being to preserve free expression over the Internet. Throughout various Websites, one cannot help but notice that nearly every page bears the graphic of a blue ribbon, the symbol of support for this campaign.

The very nature of the Internet is both fascinating and dangerous. With nearly 51 million adults having at least occasional access, there is bound to be a wide representation

of beliefs, values, and customs (Bimber, 1996). The accessibility to otherwise unattainable information allows for individuals to discover more about themselves and the universe in which they live than they could through any other medium. The Internet possesses the potential to unite strangers, mold minds, even change lives. These latent capabilities are becoming self-evident in the world of politics, a domain in which the Internet is threatening to replace American status-quo democracy.

Governments, and indeed political parties, all over the world are realizing the possibilities of this medium for information dissemination and recruitment activities. European political parties are possibly more advanced than American parties in their use of cyberspace, even though Europe has far fewer Internet users per capita. For example in Great Britain, the Labour Party was one of the first to make extensive use of the Internet. Labour Party Conferences were held on the Net in both 1994 and 1995, conferences in which politicians and the public could interact. Labour leader Tony Blair has stated his commitment to "Eventually...[have] every home wired up in New Britain..."(Noble, 1996, p. 29). Other countries that are becoming "cyber-savvy" include Italy, Sweden, Canada, and Holland. In the United States, 1996 proved to be a milestone in Internet political history. Being an election year, the Net was seized by political activists, parties, and interest groups in hopes of swaying voters.

The Internet has been a great benefit for third parties because they do not get the television and radio attention that the mainstream parties enjoy. Also, most third parties are on strict budgets; they can not afford to compete with the two major parties. Other alternative candidates, such as Ralph Nader of the Green Party, voluntarily limit campaign spending. Nader, 1996 presidential candidate for the Green Party, ran his

entire campaign on a self-imposed $5,000 budget (Schmitt, 1996, p. 9). Because of such confined resources, third parties must seek economically feasible ways of reaching the masses. The Internet is of extreme value to these parties because it "levels the playing field." Any political party can afford to advertise over the Internet and, in the same manner, each party has basically the same exposure.

Websites such as "Project VoteSmart" and "Third Parties '96" were among the several campaigns launched during the 1996 campaign in order to educate voters and further third-party awareness. Project VoteSmart was an organization created to offer elective choices to the public. On its pages were listed nearly twenty-five political parties. From the Republican National Committee to the Communist Party USA to the Free D.C. Party, visitors were presented an extensive scope of electoral alternatives. The site included portions of each party's platform complete with hypertext, which allowed users to access a party's homepage with a simple click of a button. Sending in comments and/or asking questions via e-mail was also an added option ("Project VoteSmart," 1996).

"Third Parties '96" described itself as "a bold national organizing effort to...create a common-sense alternative for the nation's voters in '96: AN ELECTORAL COALITION FOR A NEW MAINSTREAM" ("Third Parties '96," 1996). According to the planning team, 62% of Americans were dissatisfied with the choice between Clinton and Dole in the 1996 Presidential election, and the time to "present a new political alternative for the neglected mainstream of American voters" was at hand. The basic goal of Third Parties '96 was to form a coalition "shadow government" among various minor political parties. The group, including representatives from over twenty emerging

political parties, organized for two conventions and created an alliance. The first action taken by the organization was the adoption of the "Common Ground Declaration." This electronic document laid out the goals, guidelines, and plan of action of the group. In the future, the group will eventually create a national slate representing this coalition, a slate which will be presented in the election in the year 2000. The key benefit of such a coalition is that it gives emerging parties greater opportunities at achieving ballot access ("Third Parties '96," 1996).

Project VoteSmart and Third Parties '96 are both prime examples of how the Internet is expanding democracy by educating the electorate. Because the Internet is inherently egalitarian, every group has an equal right to present its beliefs, no matter how unpopular those beliefs are. Although this privilege has led to a great deal of controversy, individuals are learning to make their own decisions and mold their own beliefs based on the information that is presented to them.

No matter how revolutionary one's political beliefs may be, by communicating over the Internet, he or she is very likely to find several other people with the same beliefs. This is, at least, the expectation of several political parties that are currently organizing over the Internet. These "cyberparties," political parties of the cyber world, are perhaps the most intriguing political phenomena resulting from the technology of the Internet.

Cyberparties are self-proclaimed political parties which are organizing, advertising, and recruiting via the Internet. Their entire existence is electronic, and they are not registered within any particular state because they enjoy a global existence through their homepages. Some parties are easily accessible and overtly attempt to

recruit members. Others, however, are hidden within the obscure crevices of the Internet and can only be reached through other Websites. Cyberparties differ dramatically from conventional parties in both structure and function. Obviously, they do not fit comfortably in the "textbook" definition of "political party" as defined earlier in this presentation because they were born from much different intentions. A better understanding of the nature, goals, and possible ramifications of Internet cyberparties can be achieved by selecting representative cyberparties and comparing their similarities and differences. Three such parties are the Pansexual Peace Party (P.P.P.), a grassroots organization advocating peace, freedom, and creative expression; the V.A.M.P.S. Against the Modern Political System, a group aspiring to "fix ...a corrupted government" ("V.A.M.P.S.," 1996); and the National Election Therapy (N.E.T.) Party, the party for Internet users to get closer to "real" politics.

There are two commonalties of these and the majority of other cyberspace parties - the use of humor and propaganda and the lack of a hierarchical party structure. Several decades ago, Maurice Duverger noted the value of propaganda. In his words, "Parties create opinion as much as they represent it; they form it by propaganda..." (Duverger, 1976, p. 422). The Pansexual Peace Party (P.P.P.) is a cyberparty that began primarily as a propaganda organization. Included in its electronic membership application is an enticing offer for a free bumper sticker upon joining ("Pansexual Peace Party," 1996). Here are some of the clever slogans devised by the V.A.M.P.S. Party to win over new members:

- "Help us bring the government back from the dead."

- "Help us breathe new life into a dying government."
- "Help us take a bite out of crime - Reform the Government" ("V.A.M.P.S.," 1996).

In a similar fashion, the N.E.T. Party nominated Richard Stands, the nation's first "virtual candidate" in the 1996 Presidential election. The party campaigned for their beloved candidate, and in daily critiques, judged the performances of the other three noteworthy candidates, "Slick Willie, Jurassic Bob, and Ross 'big ears, bigger mouth' Perot" ("N.E.T. Party," 1996).

In essence, these parties are very serious about the issues and goals that they are representing. However, instead of trying to impress society with elusive political jargon, they are appealing to individuals with even minimal understanding of the political process. These parties are not being organized by political theorists or academics but by everyday people who are seeking to change how the government works. Therefore, these organizers are using methods which will appeal to the *emotions,* rather than the intellect, of the disheartened majority of voters in society -- their potential members.

Also in contrast to other American parties, these new cyberparties pride themselves on not having a rigid hierarchical structure. They lack any formal organizational chart or even a building; their organizational core is within the ever-expanding walls of the Internet. These grass-roots parties are much more egalitarian than other U.S. parties because of this. According to Pansexual Peace Party organizers, "The P.P.P. has no hierarchical structure, and it never will. The Website will continue to promote the ideas of this platform, which will be revised continually..." ("P.P.P.," 1996).

Likewise, Mr. de Aelfweald from the V.A.M.P.S. Party has stated that he wants to be a "catalyst, not the supreme ruler." Therefore, he continues, "I am trying to encourage those that are interested in the party to help me define the party and be a founding member of the party and its ideals..." ("V.A.M.P.S.," 1996). The V.A.M.P.S. Party, like the P.P.P. , also uses its Internet Website to coordinate and post all party activities. Party founder Malachi D'Aelfweald hopes to change the federal regulations on filing for party status. Currently, this process must be done in a specific state, but this party wants to be recognized as a political party whose physical existence is listed on the Net instead of a particular state (D'Aelfweald, Nov. 9, 1996).

The above demonstrates why there is a need to distinguish cyberparties from other third parties. Many theorists would erroneously categorize all third parties as being of the same origin and species. However, in comparing any one of the cyberparties discussed here with a familiar third party such as Ross Perot's Reform Party, one would find a major contrast. The Reform Party initiative did not come out of a convention of grassroots supporters but from a top-down decision by a billionaire of uncertain motive and purpose, and the party-building activities have been supported by Perot's personal fortune and paid staffers. Cyberparties do not have such resources, nor do they find them necessary to their purposes.

These cyberparties are unlikely to ever achieve electoral success. However, electoral victory does not appear to be a major concern. Although the P.P.P. ran a candidate in the 1996 Presidential election, the party has no false hope concerning political success. According to the party's founder, "We have no illusions about attaining electibility. We may sponsor candidates and urge members to take political action from

time to time, and we will work to attain ballot status, but we do not expect to become a major party in any government" (Freidenker, Nov. 9, 1996).

Cyberparties *do* have a desire to participate in government in some fashion. However, the degree in which they desire to cooperate and the duties expected of their members differ. This is what distinguishes them from *each other*.

TYPOLOGY OF CYBERPARTIES

In order to organize cyberparties into some kind of differential framework, one may devise a typology of cyberparties with each category designation being operationally defined by the party's goals within the *current* governmental system. The first classification is the *Evolving Cyberparty.* This is the most advanced class of cyberparty, because such a party desires to evolve into a feasible party organization within the existing political system. The Internet serves the group a vital basic function - recruitment. Once a party attains a notable membership base, however, it begins to explore other means of furthering the party. The Pansexual Peace Party can be classified in this group. Until recently, the P.P.P. placed its support behind the Green Party or any other party which worked to "reduce the harm that human beings inflict upon one another as well as on the rest of the earth" ("P.P.P.," 1996). Today, it seems they are going out on their own in the realm of politics and are even planning a convention for the summer of 1997 in Texas. According to Jimi Freidenker, "Chairentity" of the PPP, "our presidential candidate, Judy Brugger, was on the ballot in ZERO states [in 1996], but she will be running again for the 2000 position, and we hope to get her on a few by then"

(Freidenker, Nov. 9, 1996). This signifies the party's intent to continue its development and actually to solicit votes from the public.

In contrast, the *Revolutionary Cyberparty* has the potential of becoming a functioning party within society but will only seek to do so if the current electoral system is changed. This group has the primary goal of reforming many voting and ballot access regulations. The Internet factors into these goals considerably. The V.A.M.P.S. Against the Modern Political System Party is considered a Revolutionary Cyberparty. This party has political aspiration, but it hopes to attain political recognition and achievement by revolutionizing the voting process. Like the P.P.P., it will also run a candidate in 2000 for the office of President. However, according to founder Malachi D'Aelfweald, "Before that can happen, there are many things that the party would have to get changed - like the ability to petition over the Internet, which is not currently allowed..." (D'Aelfweald, Nov. 15, 1996.). Thus, V.A.M.P.S. wants to perform the function within government of changing the current regulations on attaining ballot access. As stated earlier, this party also hopes to further its own existence, and that of other cyberparties, by being recognized as a true political party before the law even though it exists solely on the Internet and is not registered within any one state.

The final category contained in this typology is the *Fleeting Cyberparty*. The modifier "Fleeting" is simply used to denote that these parties are no longer in existence. These groups appear for a specified amount of time, usually around election years, perform a political "duty," and soon after election the results, the parties remove their Websites from the Internet. One would be tempted to argue that these cyberparties are not parties at all because their existence covers such a short timespan. Nonetheless, these

parties can not be discounted on the basis of their short lives. Throughout history, most third/minor parties have appeared in elections in order to bring an issue of public interest to the forefront, only to disintegrate not long after. The National Election Therapy (N.E.T.) Party figures well within this category. The overriding objective in founding the party was to organize a protest against any candidate for political office who threatened censorship of the Internet. According to the party homepage,

> The inspiration behind the N.E.T. Party...was the Communications Decency Act, the ridiculously vague, absurdly unconstitutional, astoundingly ignorant attempt by election-obsessed politicians to squelch the creativity and freedom of our beloved medium. Basically, we figured, if they were going to employ politics to make war on our Net, we were going to employ the Net to make war on their politics (1996).

Censorship was the party's main organizational force; however, the party also used its Website to discuss the possibilities of the Internet in the future, such as making the Internet child-friendly, wiring schools and the nation, encouraging people to vote, and reforming campaign finance laws. Although the N.E.T. Party disappeared two weeks after the election, it promises to return in 2000 to battle the forces which are threatening censorship and to propel the Internet into the 21st century.

TRANSFORMATIONS IN DEMOCRACY

Cyberparties are unlikely to achieve wide-range electoral victories. Despite this prospect, these parties could very well influence politics by appealing to a new mass electorate, thus enhancing democracy in this country. In order to realistically compete in politics, all active parties must work within the framework established by the two major parties over a century ago to ensure status quo democracy. The new cyberparties are threatening the status quo by offering a new framework, one that is more democratic and directed toward the people, not toward the mere advancement a few political elite.

The organization of today's mainstream and even most third parties is certainly not in conformity with the notion of democracy. Their internal structures are essentially autocratic and oligarchic; their leaders are not really appointed by the members, in spite of appearances, but nominated by a central committee. This tends to create an exclusive ruling class, isolated from the everyday members of the party. This is not true democracy because the "party oligarchy" is a minority compared to the mass of voters who actually vote for the parties in elections (Duverger, 1976, p. 422).

One of the most influential factors leading to the Internet's rapid expansion is its grass-roots structure. The structure of the Internet allows networks to gain access

anywhere there are phone cables (Elmer-Dewitt, 1995). This is leading to a much more diverse population. Since people from all over the world are finding it easier and less expensive to "get on-line," cyberspace is becoming a world in which individuals with very different backgrounds, lifestyles, and belief systems are coming into contact. Cultural and ideological differences can result in conflict, but more often, the Internet provides people with a mode of finding others who share similar attitudes, feelings, and beliefs. Although one may be offended by such groups as the Ku Klux Klan and other "hate groups," the Internet gives all groups an equal voice in cyberspace. Bruce Sterling describes the state of the Internet as "a rare example of a true, modern, functional anarchy" (Sterling, 1996). Any individual has as much right as any other to post information and to be seen and heard because there is no universally accepted authority to grant or deny this right. Basically, the equality among every individual user of the Internet is so extreme that it is essentially anarchic.

By having access to these and other sites, individuals can at least gain a less-distorted understanding of a certain group from the group itself, not from outside opinions. Manning claims that

> This technology provides a site for people to communicate with one another that was not there before...in that sense it has empowered some people to look more closely at the political activities around them and to get more involved. The Internet has taken power away from media analysts and pundits and told people they too can look and analyze for themselves (1996, pp. A1, A12).

This kind of understanding can lead to a more educated, informed electorate. Not only can individuals decide for themselves where they belong and don't belong, but they can learn *why* by accessing Websites and "chat groups" to let them see for themselves.

Chat groups are Internet communities which organize in order to discuss certain issues of public policy, current events, or any other topic of concern. Because of the centralization of topics, most users limit themselves to chat groups with which they share something in common. Thus, they can avoid any groups which they deem socially harmful or destructive. While there is undoubtedly material on the Internet that could be considered offensive, all information is hidden in cyberspace until someone electronically summons it.

Stripped of the external trappings of wealth, power, beauty and social status, people tend to be judged in the cyberspace of the Internet only by their ideas and their ability to express these ideas (Elmer-Dewitt, 1995). Individuals are accepted or criticized based on these criteria, not on superficial characteristics.

Many theorists have offered their predictions on how the Internet will produce a transformation in the nature of democratic practice in the U.S., some positive and some negative. Robert Dahl made the assertion that increasing technology in telecommunications such as the Internet could play a key role in making possible an "advanced democratic country" (Dahl, 1989, p. 339). According to Mitchell Kapor, the Net will "enable a Jeffersonian Revolution." And Grossman proclaims that the technology of the Internet will precipitate a new "electronic republic" (Grossman, 1995, p. 212).

Others, however, are less confident. Many expect that society will become even more stratified because of expanding, expensive technology that will be out of financial reach for many. They claim that it will only create an even greater cleavage among those who are well-off and those who are disadvantaged. This will allow only the upper-class

to participate in public forums; thus, the lower-classes will become even more alienated from the political process (Bimber, 1996).

One other interesting point of view comes from Nicholas Negroponte. In his book *Being Digital*, he writes that he expects "the nation-state to evaporate" under the influence of increasing communication technology. The demise of the nation-state as a viable political entity is a major topic of debate. The degree of information dissemination taking place over the Internet could very well strengthen social and ethnic divisions by creating bonds among groups and strengthening their communication links. This would possibly lead to demands upon government for self-determination, leading up to nationalistic movements.

It is too soon to judge these claims. The Internet is in its infancy and its role in politics has so far been very limited. In his essay "The Internet and Political Transformation," Bruce Bimber asserts that the Internet is likely to bring forth incremental political changes rather than a grand transformation in democracy. He claims that there are two possible transformations - a Populist transformation or a Communal transformation. He goes on to discuss that there are certain conditions which must be met before these transformations will take place and that these conditions are highly unlikely (Bimber, 1996).

The populist transformation is an optimistic prediction that the Internet will take political power of the elites by granting individuals direct communication links to the government. In Bimber's words,

> The crux of this idea is that the Net may increase individual-level engagement in public life to such an extent that a large-scale transformation takes place in how interests are represented. This

> transformation will entail a shift in the center of mass of American politics toward individuals -- the fabled 'little guy' -- and away from interest groups and their lobbyists, party organizations, unions, corporations, and others involved in the professional business of politics (1996).

The second possible transformation involves the ability of the Internet to create communities among individuals in society. According to this expectation, the "most valuable function of the Net is neither connecting citizens with government nor citizens with political organizers, but rather connecting citizens with one another" (Bimber, 1996). This claim stems from research showing that electronic networks lead to the "breakdown of status-based social structures" (Grossman, 1995, p. 214).

According to Bimber, both the populist and communal transformations are improbable. A populist transformation would rely on a surge in political participation by individuals as a result of greater access to information, and a communal transformation would rely on a change in deeply-rooted beliefs about "sense of community" and trust (Bimber, 1996).

Political participation rates have historically not risen due to technological advances. For example, in 1939 George Gallup predicted that radio would commence the arrival of a "town meeting on a national scale." Gallup believed that radio combined with universal newspapers would allow people to deliberate over issues together and to express their wishes directly to the government (Bimber, 1996). Obviously, Gallup's predictions were overly optimistic and imprecise. Bimber argues that not only has the flux in broadcast media throughout the twentieth century failed to increase voter participation, but that it has actually caused the decline in participation that has been increasing since the 1960's. He observes that

> ...the historically high turnout rates of the late 19th century were the result of low levels of information and the susceptibility of voters to emotional appeals. This is to say that before the rise of broadcast media, increases in information about politics may have contributed to decreased turnout. More information may decrease the ability of parties and candidates to manipulate, increase skepticism about government, and therefore lead to diminished turnout (1996).

Other evidence has been presented that those who now use the Internet for political purposes have been involved in politics all along -- that they have not been converted because of the advent of the Net. Increases in participation are unlikely because those who use the Internet for political or government-oriented services have already been doing so (Hauben, 1996).

Bimber's argument against the plausibility of a communal transformation stems from his personal definition of "trust." Trust in government and trust in community have been declining in American society for several years, but, Bimber argues, "if the Net causes a shift toward new forms of community, then we should see at least some changes in this trend" (1996).

Although Bimber cites veritable information in support of his arguments, the Internet is of such a new high caliber of communication that it is impossible to compare it to anything of the past, including newspaper, radio, or even television. Approaching the 21st century, Americans view political indifference to be unacceptable. Thus, the society of today can hardly be compared to that of the 1930s when the popularization of radio offered unrealized promises for greater democracy.

At least one group of people would have very strong feelings about Bimber's contention that a new form of communal trust is unlikely as a result of Internet interaction -- the Netizens. According to this group of Internet citizens, the Internet *has* produced a

"new form of community." In fact, the Internet has created such a strong feeling of community that the group is demanding their own sort of "bill of rights." The previously-mentioned "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace" written by John Perry Barlow serves this purpose for the Netizen people. Below are a few of the statutes included in the document:

- Cyberspace consists of transactions, relationships, and thought itself, arrayed like a standing wave in the web of our communications. Our is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live.
- We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth.
- We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity.
- Your legal concepts of property, expression, identity, movement, and context do not apply to us. They are based on matter, there is no matter here (1996).

There is a visible message here that these people feel themselves to be a community -- a community that has such a strong connection that the inhabitants declare themselves an entirely new nation free from government regulation. Deutsch acknowledges that the Netizen community has the characteristics of a distinct "people." In Deutsch's words, "a people is a group of individuals who have some objective characteristics in common…[including] language, territorial residence, traditions, habits,

historical memories, and the like" (Deutsch, 1966, p. 17). Netizens share these characteristics in unique ways and varying degrees.

Although many languages are spoken over the Internet, English is by far predominant, and most Websites that are posted in a foreign language are also available in English. Secondly, the "territorial residence" of the Netizen community is cyberspace - the world of the Internet. Lastly, with the continuing evolution of the Internet, a certain culture is becoming predominate with its own "netiquette," which emphasizes individual freedom and expression (Bartelli, 1997).

However absurd a "virtual community" may sound, the Internet is truly creating unique bonds among people that transcend any other form of communication. No matter how influential the inventions of the radio and television were in the public and private lives of individuals, these media were deliverers of information. They could not provide their users with a source of identity comparable to the Internet because there was no room for self-expression.

The cyberparties can also be considered communities. These groups share a bond and give their members a source of political identity. This is possibly the greatest contribution which these parties can make in a world of political disgust and alienation. As discussed earlier, these parties have very little chance of becoming electoral powerhouses. Their ability to exert tremendous influence over policy agendas is also dubious because of their limited funds and small memberships.

Cyberparties are a political alternative for those members of society who want to share their political opinions with those who share some of their same beliefs but do not want to be pressured into lobbying, voting, or advertising their political ideology.

Membership in a cyberparty is unobtrusive and can even be anonymous if the member chooses to keep his identity hidden. This is what makes demographic data concerning the members of cyberparties impossible to obtain. Most membership applications only ask for a "name" and an "e-mail address," and both of these are optional. According to Jimi Freidenker of the P.P.P.,

> We have not gathered any demographic data yet. We wanted our membership application to be unobtrusive, so we didn't ask that. We're planning on sending out a survey later, but we didn't want to make answering such a survey an impediment to membership (Freidenker, Nov. 9, 1996).

Although the long-term goals of these cyberparties are somewhat idealistic and elusive, there are several issues that these groups are supporting which could very well garner government attention and consideration. These issues include, but are not limited to, reforming campaign finance, changing voting regulations, and ending government threats of censorship.

Concerning campaign finance reform, the N.E.T. Party affirms that "when legislators spend more than half their time raising money, rather than addressing our nation's problems, perhaps it's another sign that it's time for tinkering" ("N.E.T.," 1996). The party also offers their own solution to this ongoing problem. They call for the establishment of an "independent commission" which would remain unbiased and would make recommendations to Congress, instead of allowing members of Congress to vote on campaign finance reform themselves ("N.E.T.," 1996).

The V.A.M.P.S. Party offers its own plan for reforming campaign finance spending -- making greater use of the Internet. The costs of campaigns and exposure are very expensive; therefore, many smaller parties and candidates have self-imposed

spending caps. For these groups, the Internet is a vital tool of advertising and recruitment. If certain restrictions are imposed on campaign spending, other larger parties are sure to be affected and will probably make greater use of the Internet in their own campaigns.

Voting regulations are another target of reform of these parties. This is a main concern of the N.E.T. Party platform, which states: "1) Voting should be as easy as possible...so should registering to vote...so should finding out information about the candidates, 2) Voters should only vote if they are informed voters..." ("N.E.T.," 1996). The platform goes on to deliver its opinion of the law in most states requiring voters to register thirty days before an election. "...does it strike anyone else as strange that members of Congress went ballistic when the Brady Bill imposed a five day waiting period for GUNS, but no one has bothered to raise a peep about voting wait periods? Maybe they consider voting more dangerous...to their incumbency" ("N.E.T.," 1996).

A common goal among all cyberparties is their campaigns for free expression and their hopes of making the Internet more widespread. Every homepage bears the blue ribbon graphic, which symbolizes their stance on censorship. The Pansexual Peace Party platform states that, concerning communications, "The PPP will work to maximize freedom of expression and access to information for all citizens. We will promote the development of the public telecommunications infrastructure, with the goal of universal access to the Internet" ("P.P.P.," 1996).

THE FUTURE OF THE POLITICAL PARTY

A problem that these cyberparties are sure to face is the reluctance of party theorists to acknowledge their impact and to recognize them as "true" political parties. There are certain recurring party phenomena that have become more or less established. But are these characteristics what *define* a party or are they merely characteristics of those which are the most familiar and/or influential?

Political parties were first designed for control over voters -- for limited, self-serving purposes -- to increase the chances of getting elected. Cyberparties were created out of much more unselfish intentions. For example, Malachi D'Aelfweald of V.A.M.P.S. states:

> My choices were simple... leave a country I believe to be corrupt, or try and fix it. This party is my first step in trying to make a difference. I have ideas about what I would like to get changed, but regardless of the fact that I am the founder, I am just another member of the party and have as much say as anyone else... (D'Aelfweald, Nov. 15, 1996).

Because of the uniqueness of Internet technology, no other party in history compares with these cyberparties. It is time to liberate party theory from pragmatic, conventional standards and to appreciate their political functions and possible ramifications in today's society. In order to accommodate these modernistic parties, the definition of *political party* must be all-inclusive and non-prejudicial.

Given the youthfulness of these cyberparties (most are less than a year old), they have had little opportunity to perform in any aspect of the government or politics. They

have been successful at recruiting members, however, and also attracting attention. Founded in January of 1996, the Pansexual Peace Party had recruited 120 members in eleven months via its Internet Website (Freidenker, Nov. 9, 1996). And according to Malachi D'Aelfweald, V.A.M.P.S. will be featured in a Berkeley magazine and is currently the topic of another research project being undertaken by a high school senior class in Texas ("V.A.M.P.S.," 1996).

At this point in the Internet's history, one must be cautious when attempting to analyze long-term trends at such an early stage. According to Hauben, "using the number of households with access to technology as a yardstick, with the Net we are now about where the U.S. stood with television in the early 1950s" (1996). It was not until around the 1960s when the television began to exert its many influences that continue today.

Surely the Net promises to affect how politics works in the United States, and probably around the world. Already the Net is playing a role in how campaigns are advertised, how journalists perform, how constituents communicate with parties and officials, and even how government interacts with the public. The cyberparties could very well provide the link that the Internet needs in order to advance its impact in the political process. If expression remains virtually control-free and individuals retain the right to organize via the Internet, a forgotten majority of citizens and potential voters could find their political identities. However, if the government takes into account how sweeping these transformations may be, it will probably find it in *its* best interest to install some type of regulatory device or commission.

With so many people with access to diverse information and ideals, there is a serious threat to the status quo democracy which exists in this country today. The

Internet has made its presence known as the tool to do the job, but if a democratic transformation is going to take place, whether it be incremental or revolutionary in nature, the American people must take advantage of the technology which is being laid before them.

APPENDIX A

Third-Party Registration*

Party	Registered Voters
Libertarian Party	227,399
Reform Party	164,606
Natural Law Party	103,931
Green Party	88,788
Peace and Freedom Party	70,000

* Source: "3rd Party Central" <http:www.math.princeton.edu/~tpbarber/3pc/chart2/> September 20, 1996.

APPENDIX B

Third-Party Members Currently Holding Office*

Party	Local Offices	State Offices	Total
Libertarian Party	170	3	173
Green Party	79	-	79
Patriot Party	5	1	6
Reform Party	-	1	1
Natural Law Party	-	-	0

* Source: "3rd Party Central" <http://www.math.princeton.edu/~tpbarbe/3pc/chart1/> September 20, 1996.

APPENDIX C

GROWTH OF THE INTERNET*

Date	***Hosts***
1969	4
1971	23
1974	62
1977	111
1981	213
1982	235
1983	562
1984	1,024
1985	1,961
1986	5,089
1987	28,174
1988	56,000
1989	159,000
1990	313,000
1991	617,000
1992	1,136,000
1993	1,776,000

* Source: Zakon, Robert H'obbes;. "Hobbes' Internet Timeline v2.5." <http://info.isoc.org.guest/zakon/Internet/History?HIT.html> January 2, 1997.

Date (Continued)	***Hosts***
1994	**3,864,000**
1995	**4,852,000**
1996	**12,881,000**

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