After Internet Time: A Decade of the Berglund Center/A Call for Proposals

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Editorial by Jeffrey Barlow

Introduction: This piece is both an editorial, in which I discuss the notion of “Internet Time” and also a call for submissions. These are to be published first in Interface, then in an edited and peer-reviewed print-on-demand volume from the Berglund Press in the summer of 2011.

The genesis of this project lies in the 10th anniversary of the Berglund Center for Internet Studies at Pacific University Oregon, occurring this spring. During these ten years (roughly 1999-2010) we have seen the continuing impact of the Internet upon global culture and technology. This is not, of course, by any means the period during which the Internet developed most rapidly. That period, in our opinion, was the decade immediately preceding the founding of the Berglund Center. The Berglund Center has existed during the third stage of the Internet, and it is this stage which we wish to better understand. We believe that this third stage, unlike the earlier two, gives us better opportunity to make useful evaluations. In its third stage, the Internet has acquired a more or less fixed form, and now we have a better chance to understand it than we did in its earlier manifestations.

The Stages of the Internet: The first stage of the Internet proper, we believe, is the decade from 1980-1990. At that time the technology behind the Internet was of primary interest to those trying to develop systems to interconnect isolated computers and systems. This process had actually begun several decades earlier [1], but the protocols necessary for true networking were not standardized until 1982. We’ll look at the second stage, “Internet Time,” below.

In the third stage, during the 1990s, the Internet became widely used; in 1992 the millionth host was added to it. Only then did the Internet become truly influential and begin to have a significant cultural impact. The study of this impact is, of course, the charge of the Berglund Center. Our founders, Jim and Mary Berglund, had understood by the mid 1990s the significance of the rapid expansion of the Internet, and moved to fund the Center in 1999.
For my part, I had joined the Association for History and Computing in the spring of 2007 and founded its e-journal, the *Journal of the Association for History and Computing* (JAHC), which first appeared in the spring of 2008. My original intent at JAHC was simply to try to understand the place of digital content and communications in the long development of historical studies [2]. I concluded, as a result of my initial research, that not only were electronic publications in history inevitably going to have considerable impact, but that it was very likely that the process of producing even paper works would be impacted by digitization and that, consequently, print-on-demand was going to emerge as a significant technology [3].

The Berglund Center was carefully nurtured by its first two Directors, Joe Howell, who pulled together its organization and its mission, and Steve Boone, who got the center up and running, inviting me aboard as Faculty Director. While I continued my involvement with the JAHC until the spring of 2006, I also began editing *Interface*, which first appeared in October 2001. I later became Director upon Steve’s retirement and devoted myself entirely to the Berglund Center.

Now we have concluded that it is time to mark our first decade by doing a survey of the Impact of the Internet during that period, written largely by our regular contributors at *Interface*, but including such additional papers as we may elect to publish. There is special advantage to studying the Internet’s impact in this decade. If the growth of the Internet has slowed, it has consequently become easier to evaluate than it was in either of its first two decades.

The first period, from the 1970′s through to about 1980, was a geek’s paradise—the rest of us are highly indebted, but largely unable to understand exactly what it was the techies were really doing. But by 1980 the visionaries among us began to apply the Internet to their work. By 1990, everyone (except those who would not see) could observe the impact of the Internet all around us, much accelerated, of course, by the events known as the Dot.Com Bubble, usually dated from 1995-2000 [4].

That period saw the development of some ideas key to the impact of the Internet. Some of those ideas were “disruptive” in the argot of the time. The rapid development of the Internet seemed to undermine, or at least to alter, many phenomena earlier simply taken as “reality.” Investors jettisoned old verities, such as the value of price-earnings ratios, and even grizzled skeptics such as Alan Greenspan thought, like Ronald Reagan, that a new day had dawned in America, precipitated by computer-mediated communications which raised productivity faster than equity values could keep up. We had a “New Economy” appropriate to the “New Day”.

One of the accepted verities that suddenly became relative was even such a fundamental concept as “time.” The concept and the measurement of time have long been argued over by philosophers [5]. These have largely divided into two schools, one of which (the Realists) see time as an absolute quality of reality, one of the seven basic units around which the universe is structured [6]. We discover reality by exploring and manipulating these qualities, or so say the Realists. In the dot.com era, philosophical realists might be said to correspond to the traditionalists of investment, who worried about their equivalents of fundamental elements of
measurement, such as price-earnings ratios.

There was, however, another competing, recent, and more with-it philosophical school derived from Leibniz and Kant, who argued that time was not outside us, not “real,” but a fundamental property of human cognition, one of the ways that we apprehend something, but not itself one of the seven fundamental somethings. This school focused not upon the known or the unknown, but upon the knower.

This school’s economic equivalent in the 1990s might be said to be represented by those who discovered “Internet Time.” These held that the development of the Internet and the very speed of digital transmission had created a sort of tipping point after which economic verities changed. All we had to do was to perceive that change. To them, time was now measured best, not by swings of a pendulum (or in the most recent system of measurement by the frequency of a Cesium atom \( [7] \)), but by rapidly increasing production cycles, which some argued, was now seven times faster than formerly. This was the time frame appropriate to the “New Day” and to the “New Economy.” This concept was to have its consequences.

Andrew Odlyzko, then at AT&T Labs, assigned the basic cause of the Internet bubble to the notion of Internet time:

\[ \text{A few key ideas appear to have led all these experienced people astray, ideas that are closely interrelated and reinforce each other. The most important was “Internet time.” This was the perception that product development and consumer acceptance were now occurring in a fraction of the traditional time. Closely related to the concept of Internet time was the idea of “first-mover advantage.” Further support for the dot-com craze was provided by several other notions, such as “network effects,” “increasing returns,” “control of open standards,” and “standards lock-in.” Of all these ideas, though, Internet time was crucial. If indeed seven years of traditional product cycles were now compressed to one year, then anything might change in the blink of an eye [8].} \]

Internet Time turned out largely to be hyperbole. Realism has reasserted itself; price-earnings proved a more useful measurement than did production cycles. Now that Internet Time, marked by its often illogical and discontinuous enthusiasms, has taken on more realistic parameters, we want to understand exactly what has occurred.

At the Berglund Center we certainly do not hope finally to solve the question of the precise nature of time, but we do want to explore the impact of the Internet over the last ten years. We are going to commission ten articles, for which we will pay generously, by the standards of a non-profit publication (For details see our formal call for papers). These will be peer-reviewed, initially, to select among the submissions for e-publication. Then they will be included in a print-on-demand work to be published in hard copy at the Berglund Center in the summer of 2011. The working title is “After Internet Time: A Decade of the Impact of the Internet, 2000-2010.”
We have not lightly arrived at the decision to publish in both digital form and in paper copy. We are well aware of the far larger audience which will access on-line pieces as opposed to ordering paper copies. However, despite the many changes wrought by the Internet, some factors have remained constant for specific forms of content. Scholars want archival physical copies of their work for certification purposes, and paper publication still carries more inherent authority than do digital works. We have also found, in our experiences in publishing two works with Create Space(TM) during the last six months that the conversion from digital to paper has become easy and rewarding.

Our first work, Berglund Fellow Yang Desheng's *Jigsaw III*, written for Chinese students and teachers, is now easily available as far as China, the audience he intended to reach. Our recent publication of the 1999 postings of *Interface*, assembled into a paper volume similar to those of any other major journal, is also available and each has been a wonderful learning experience for our students, and carried the Berglund Center, in a sense, back to the future [9].

If you are interested in writing about how the impact of the Internet has impacted your particular field of work (or of play?) in the 1990’s, please see our call for proposals and join us in seeking to better understand what has followed Internet Time.

**Endnotes:**

[1] For my discussion here on the stages of the development of the Internet, I am drawing on both my experience at *The Journal of the Association for History and Computing*, and several Internet sites. See: “Internet History” at the Computer History Museum, [http://www.computerhistory.org/internet_history/](http://www.computerhistory.org/internet_history/). This begins the development of the Internet at 1962, and ends it at 1992, after all the key technologies were in place and sufficient scale (one million hosts) had been reached to set it upon its present course. Another useful source—in some senses more useful in that it discusses cultural and economic impacts as well as underlying technology—is found at the very well documented Wikipedia article ‘History of the Internet’ at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Internet#TCP:2FIP](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Internet#TCP:2FIP)


[5] I am indebted once again to a very well documented article in Wikipedia, “Time” at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Time](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Time) This summary can be found there:

“Among prominent philosophers, there are two distinct viewpoints on time. One view is that
time is part of the fundamental structure of the universe, a dimension in which events occur in sequence. Time travel, in this view, becomes a possibility as other “times” persist like frames of a film strip, spread out across the time line. Sir Isaac Newton subscribed to this realist view, and hence it is sometimes referred to as Newtonian time. The opposing view is that time does not refer to any kind of “container” that events and objects “move through”, nor to any entity that “flows”, but that it is instead part of a fundamental intellectual structure (together with space and number) within which humans sequence and compare events. This second view, in the tradition of Gottfried Leibniz and Immanuel Kant, holds that time is neither an event nor a thing, and thus is not itself measurable nor can it be travelled.”


[8] The myth of Internet time (Preprint version) Andrew Odlyzko
http://www.dtc.umn.edu/~odlyzko/doc/internet.time.myth.txt Odlyzko began this pre-print article (written in mid-2000) by suggesting “The attitude that “the Internet changes everything” is changing to denigration of the Internet as the “Citizen’s Band radio of the 1990s.” Yet just as the early attitude was overoptimistic, the new one could easily become unjustifiably over pessimistic.” He himself might now reconsider some of his more negative comments about at least the economic impact of the Internet in light of the experiences of the following decade.


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