

The Wired, Wired West
By JEFF FARR
Los Angeles

I was curious to see how the Club of Rome would tackle the topic of new media. At the club's recent conference in Washington, D.C., this diverse body of the world's leading intellectuals, which has discussed so many of the challenges facing us at the end of the 20th century, focused its attention for the first time on how its members think the information age/revolution/economy, especially the Internet, will impact global society.

Like many driving down Bill Gates' "road ahead," I've often wondered where this road is really leading the world. I've had my doubts about where we're going.

The Club of Rome members, too, I found, have serious concerns about the information superhighway: They have great hopes for it, too, but these are coupled with what might be called an enlightened suspicion.

As a conference observer, I was fascinated to watch a sometimes emotional debate unfold over three days between the haves and have-nots of the information superhighway — the wired and the wired-less; voices speaking for the millions who are online and the billions who aren't. Ricardo Diez-Hochleitner, the Club of Rome president, told me afterward how happy he was that a real debate had emerged, the club's purpose being to foster such debate.

To the totally wired, like the MIT Media Lab experts who were guest speakers, the Internet and all things computer are a panacea that can solve many of the world's most pressing social problems. But representatives of developing countries, generally the wired-less, said that it will only reinforce the North-South split, surely putting them further behind, further out of the loop, further out of the know.

I was moved by these voices from Uganda, Colombia, the Philippines. Many people in our countries still don't have telephones, still can't read, still don't have clean water, they said. Can we have clean water before computers? The realities they reminded the club of contrasted with the conference's setting — the Renwick Gallery's plush Grand Salon, with idyllic paintings of the pre-industrial world lining the walls.

What surprised me was that many of these have-not countries are, at this point, also decidedly *want nots*. They see the superhighway as booby-trapped. Taking the place of land mines are hamburgers and basketballs — harmless enough to us, but representative to them of all the dangers that come with Western culture. Getting on the highway equals submitting to the continued Westernization of their cultures, they said, and the potential death of their native cultures. The senior communication advisor to the U.N. Economic Commission for Africa told me that the brightest young minds in Africa are literally becoming Americans through the influence of the Net — they're trading in their own cultures for hip-hop and leaving for America the first chance they get.

Most of the Americans who responded said not to worry, that there were ways to wire the South and that the information age is nothing to fear — remember how wrong the people were who feared the introduction of the printing press.

I hope my fellow Americans are right, but I can't help thinking that more than 500 years after Gutenberg's invention, many, many people still can't read. So is it hard to imagine that 500 years from now many people still won't be wired?

SGI President Ikeda's message to the conference (see p. 1) was right on the money. He said he hoped the information revolution would "prevent knowledge and information from being monopolized by the few...." As Americans, we should take responsibility for this prevention, I thought, since we are largely the inventors, the adherents, of the new

Title: Perspective: The Wired, Wired West

Subject: World Tribune 11/07/97 n.3164 p.3 WT971107p03 Los Angeles, California

Author: Jeff Farr

Keywords: Angeles California December July Opinion Perspectives Society Tribune West Wired World

highway, and those who stand to benefit economically the most from it. Colonialism is a sad part of Western history, and I would hate to see us again running over indigenous cultures for economic gain — then just dragging what remains of them onto our superhighway.

The highway should be wide enough for everyone to drive on, and everyone should have the chance to learn how to drive on it. “Knowledge and information for everyone” — this Club of Rome conference led me to believe this should be our motto for the information revolution.

Another motto could be “Knowledge and information for wisdom,” I thought, reflecting that, as President Ikeda also said in his message, all the information in the world won’t make anyone happy unless it’s coupled with wisdom. Information has, throughout human history, been manipulated to control people — information has started wars, killed people. It has divided and conquered.

What if we could make the information revolution a step toward a human revolution, a world revolution in our wisdom? This, I hope, is the road ahead.

WT