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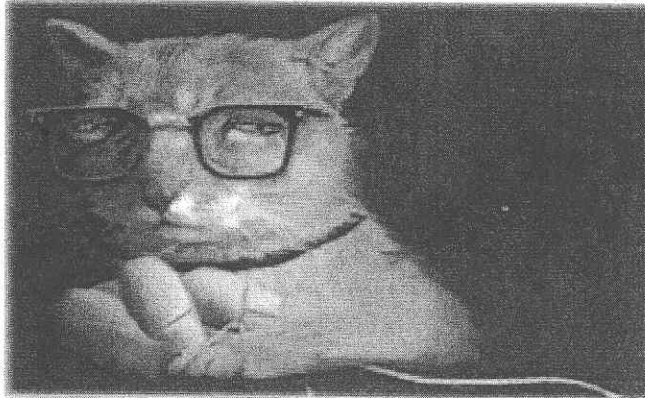
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Opinions

Cyberselfish

Why high-tech culture doesn't give a damn about anything but itself



Duane Hoffmann / MSNBC

By Paulina Borsook
SPECIAL TO MSNBC.COM

SANTA CRUZ, Calif., Sept. 8 --- At a time when money counts more than ever in politics, what impact will high tech, the affluent darlings of finance and media, have on this year's elections? Practically speaking, there will be no impact at all. Both George W. Bush and Al Gore are clearly willing to give high tech whatever it wants. And what high tech wants, Republican or Democrat, is to be left alone.

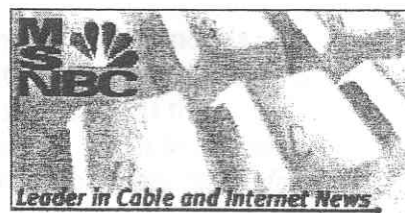
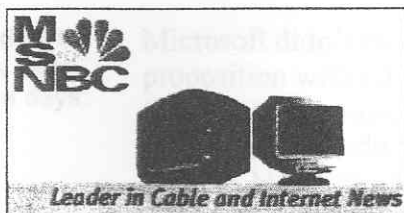
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Tech culture's primary commitment is to the city-states of high-tech, virtual archipelagoes where government is seen only in its most malign and idiotic aspects.

THE DOMINANT CULTURE of high tech is libertarian. And what passes for a political agenda in this subculture - no taxation on the Net, raising caps on high-income-bracket visas, immunity from shareholder lawsuits, and the like - can only be understood as stemming from a culturally libertarian perspective.

DESPISING GOVERNMENT

High-tech is not a monolith. Movers, shakers and drones from high-tech industries might act as fundraisers for either party. They might participate in Technet, Silicon Valley's lobbying organization, one that has both Republican and Democratic wings. But their primary commitment is to the city-states of high-tech, virtual archipelagoes where government is seen only in its most malign and idiotic aspects. Never mind that no sector of society has benefited more and suffered less from the government than high tech. And yes, government can certainly act stupidly - at times, even with malevolence. But in the land where the fantasy of Ayn Rand's solo entrepreneurial hero reigns, the notion of being enmeshed in a larger community - from which high tech derives a constant, if invisible, benefit all the time - is considered risible or offensive. Or both.

IT'S NOT MICROSOFT, STUPID

Consider the recent Department of Justice kerfluffle with Microsoft. It has been highly amusing to watch folks in Silicon Valley writhe in cognitive dissonance, caught between their appropriate fear and loathing for Microsoft and their somewhat less appropriate fear and loathing of the government. Even in the Valley, where most folks have stories of promising technologies never explored to fear of treading on Microsoft turf; of being tread upon by Microsoft as soon as Microsoft discovers theirs; of technologies stolen or copied by Microsoft; of promising enterprises and technologists bought up by Microsoft, never to be heard from again.

Dark utterances are heard about how the perfidious government only went after Microsoft because

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Are people who work in high tech more selfish than others?

- Yes. They are motivated by a distinct self-interest that sets them apart from the rest of society.
- No. People who work in high tech are no different

than anybody else.

- Everyone is more selfish these days.

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Microsoft didn't tithe enough in lobbyist money (a proposition with no basis in fact). Heard just as often is the government-as-great-Satan argument: If the government can do this to Microsoft, it can do this to anyone. Never mind that the government did "this" *for* us, and *to* Microsoft.

CHARACTER STUDY

Important as Microsoft is to the financial world, and to most consumers, Microsoft fundamentally represents the triumph of marketing genius, not of technological originality. Microsoft has had little to do with establishing high-tech style: for the most part, innovations in both engineering and culture have their beginning in the techno-world of San Francisco Bay Area. Microsoft, for the most part, represents a Borg-world unto itself, more like IBM in its heyday.

Technology and values

Is tech culture cyberselfish?

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But in its utter contempt for government, Microsoft replicated Silicon Valley values. Its intimation that if people didn't agree with its corporate maneuverings then they were simply

too stupid to understand or were still longing for the age of buggy-whips, is typical of attitudes heard all over Silicon Valley.

Microsoft's displays of arrogance were eerily similar to the libertarian cultural commonplaces mouthed so frequently by both Silicon Valley executives and worker-bees. For all the ways Microsoft and Silicon Valley are locked in a deadly embrace, - Godzilla versus the Smog Monster - both camps seem to sincerely believe that they are too cool to be bothered with what lesser beings and corporations have to put up with. It's a libertarianism of the heart and psyche.

This techno-libertarianism, whether in Redmond or Silicon Valley, can manifest itself at times with an association with the Libertarian Party, or on occasion, has something to do with policy and conventional notions of politics. But mostly it's about attitude, mindset, and reflex. And that means it's mostly about culture.

THE CONTENT OF THEIR CHARACTER

High-tech libertarianism comes in all different flavors and brands. Some devotees are socially conservative; some are simply libertine. Some are

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engaged with conventional politics (Let's donate money to the Cato Institute! Let's make sure there's little-to-no meaningful privacy regulation in this country!) Some are deeply apathetic or contemptuous of the political process in any form. But the stories these people tell themselves about how the world works and their rightful, superior place in it, are way outside the complexities and messiness people outside of high-tech have to deal with.

The 23-year-old San Francisco woman who thinks about branding and eyeballs for dogfood.com and the guy down in Silicon Valley proper who designs computer chips and the countless others in Austin, West Los Angeles, New York's Silicon Alley or Silicon Great Frozen Taiga at work on the next convergence/broadband/wireless scheme are more like each other, in epistemology and values, than the people who work outside high-tech.

The advance of techno-libertarianism didn't just happen to coincide with the speculative Internet boom that began around 1995. Anna-Lee Saxenian's book, "Regional Advantage," documented the rise of Silicon Valley of the 1970s and 1980s, mapped against the decline of Route 128 outside Boston. Jean Hollands' "Silicon Syndrome" addressed the difficulty of maintaining personal relationships in Silicon Valley of the 1980s. Neither used the word "libertarian" in their work. But both authors saw early on this same government-despising, market-worshipping, cowboy-aping, rebel-posturing, arts-and-human-services-suspecting culture.

A DANGEROUS ETHIC

Of course, the worship of self-interest and the disdain of serving the common good isn't just happening in high-tech culture. Anti-government sentiment has been in the American grain even before America had a constitutional government. The farther west you travel in this country, the greater appeal libertarianism has upon the popular consciousness. And since the days of Ronald Reagan, the equation of free enterprise with fettered government powers has held sway in the populist imagination. Richard Sennett's "Corrosion of Character" and Robert Putnam's "Bowling Alone," both document the atomization of American life and the disintegration of our common bonds that are taking place in all sectors of society.

But high-tech is routinely held up as a model of the best the United States can do. It is considered a benchmark for the rest of society to measure itself. So when the high-tech world exacerbates - and even

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celebrates - the centrifugal forces that are pulling American society apart, start worrying. Cyberselfishness may work well for a start-up, but it's not the defining ethic for the rest of human endeavors.

Paulina Borsook is author of "Cyberselfish: A Critical Romp through the Terribly Libertarian Culture of High Tech," newly published by PublicAffairs. Her fiction, essays, humor and journalism on technology and culture have appeared in Wired, Newsweek, Mother Jones, San Francisco, Salon, Suck and Feed.

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