

An advocate of Internet freedom

Esther Dyson,
*RELEASE 2.0, A design
for living in the Digital
Age*, Broadway Books,
November 1997.

The title refers to the design principles for living on the Internet. Dyson suggests that following these principles will make the Internet a happier and healthier place to live because after all, the Internet is a home. This concept is introduced at the beginning of the book. Her suggested design principles are found at its end.

Dyson tells us that the book is intended to pass on her sense of the richness and potential of the Internet and of the profundity of the changes that it will have on institutions - but not on human nature. The book is a good, clear guide to the issues and dilemmas arising from the Internet as well as the usual musings about what the world is going to become. It is easy to read and accessible to those not familiar with Internet jargon, and a comfortable mixture of information and opinion.

Dyson believes that disclosure is an important value in Internet behaviour. She puts this into practice by beginning the book with disclosures of her own concerning her childhood, education and work history.

The first half of *Release 2.0* deals with community, work, education and government. In each subject, we are given a picture of the potential of the Internet, the changes that are likely to occur and the concerns and possible solutions. A general theme which emerges is that governments should take a hands-off approach to regulating the Internet and rules should be formed by the community itself. For example, Dyson argues that the Internet has the

ability to foster communities, that it is necessary for individuals to feel that they have invested in a particular community, and that the more governments provide the less community members invest and identify.

The book outlines the way in which the Internet will help or change people in their pursuit of work: more information about what is out there, exchanging resumes, the ability of the employer and employee to check each other out. This chapter emphasises values - albeit in passing - with which we are familiar: "don't find your job; define it"; the benefits of outsourcing and of being small; and the fundamental talent of creativity.

Much of the language used is competitive. Two mantras appear: "most successful will be those who can design innovation to help the company get or stay ahead"; and "people who can think quickly will prevail". These values don't seem consistent with thinking of the Internet as "home" and the unadulterated "go-ahead" flavour feels disagreeable. There is also discussion of those most likely to succeed.

A whole chapter is devoted to governance. This is a theme revisited throughout the book mainly in advocating the minimising of government interference, developing member rules and placing faith in the market. There are interesting discussions on the questions of power shifts, jurisdiction, enforcement, "spam", the role of ISPs in governance and enforcement, e-commerce and investor protection. The chapter concludes with the observation that the best enforcement vehicle is informed citizens and customers.

The chapter on intellectual property is central. The tone is moderate but the ideas deviate from

legal and corporate orthodoxy. Rules for proper behaviour are outlined in simple non-legal language, moving on to a consideration of what is or is not moral behaviour. Again no government regulation is advocated, rather the development of community rules to address intellectual property questions. The central thesis is that there is a new economics of intellectual property where, as prices for individual copies fall (in fact, Dyson believes that it is inevitable that copies gained from the Internet will be free), people will be paid for their "attention" in a variety of ways. Basic business models for achieving this are outlined. It is proposed that people will be paid for their effort.

The book contains useful sections on content, privacy, anonymity and security. The key issues and dilemmas are described along with the latest developments for dealing with them. We are given details about current filter systems and ratings services and how they work. We learn about "TRUSTe" and "P3" as ways of dealing with privacy concerns. The section on security covers encryption in an accessible way. Dyson describes the possibility of anonymity as "one of the scariest features of the Net" and concludes that ultimately people will inhabit spaces on the Internet where members are known.

Clearly Dyson is an advocate of - among other things - choice, openness, free markets, member rules rather than governmental legislation, and free speech as guiding principles for solving Internet problems. Even if you disagree with her faith in these values, the book goes a long way to achieving its aim of showing the Internet for what it is.



Vic Marles