ASN: Reinventing Social Networks

Interview with Ken Jordan by Geert Lovink
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Here's an interview about the Augmented Social Network conducted by Geert Lovink for *Nettime*. It covers topics some folks on Rhizome might find of interest, including the representation of self in digital space, and the future of online community. Ken

Mid 2003 a wave of excitement over something called the Planetwork conference in San Francisco reached me. Apparently an alternative and innovative attempt was under way to redefine the Internet, a medium so much plagued by corporate and state control, trolls, spam and viruses. Planetwork was founded in 1998 by Erik Davis, Jim Fournier, Elizabeth Thompson and David Ulansey. It is a network in which activists mingle with technologists. Its aim has been to connect issues of global ecology and information technology. Politically speaking Planetwork is a civil society initiative that strategically positions itself as part of Silicon Valley, while at the same time celebrating the Seattle protests against corporate dominance. A typical post-dotcom phenomena, one could say. They are not so much driven by selfish libertarian greed, as once propagated by *Wired*. Rather, they are an incarnation of the hippie values and ideas that once circulated in the Well. I know, in California such distinctions may seem problematic, but it is nonetheless important to stress that there is still, or again, a progressive agenda within the IT-sector.

The first Planetwork conference took place in May 2000. As a result of this meeting a LinkTank group was formulated, resulting in a white paper entitled The Augmented Social Network: Building Identity and Trust into the Next-Generation Internet. The Augmented Social Network (ASN) is a proposal for a next generation online community that would strengthen the collaborative nature of the Internet, enhancing its ability to act as a public commons that engages citizens in civil society. How can the Internet revitalize democracy? ASN is not a piece of software or a standard as such but rather a techno-social contract. One could also see the proposed network of trust as a set of rules, a (belief) system hardwired in solid social relationships. This meta aspect of ASN doesnt make it easy to understandor to develop. The paper was presented at the PlaNetwork conference "Networking a Sustainable Future" in June, 2003. It's available as a

PDF at http://asn.planetwork.net/whitepaper.html. An HTML version is at: http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue8_8/jordan/index.html.

New York-based Ken Jordan is one the ASN authors (together with Jan Hauser and Steven Foster). Ken is a pioneer of Web-based multimedia. In 1995 he led the development of SonicNet.com, one of the first online music zines. In 1996 he was involved in the general interest zineWord.com and the action sports site Charged.com. In 1999 he co-founded the alternative global news portal MediaChannel.org. He is currently a writer and digital media consultant. In arts and theory circles he is known for *Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality*, an anthology (co-edited with Randall Packer) that traces the secret history of digital multimedia.

With Ken Jordan I discussed the call for trust and the question of sustainable social networks. Is the Internet consensus culture cure or disease? Instead of merely posing the power question, like in the case of ICANN and WSIS, the ASN initiative points at exciting conceptual realms out there in which civil society is not just a user, not a victim of governments and Microsofts. Instead, it positions itself in the drivers seat and takes place at the drawing board of the network society.

GL: Ken, what motivated you to develop the proposal for an Augmented Social Network?

KJ: The way information is organized, who has access to it, and under what circumstances access is permitted - these questions are central to how power manifests in society. Digital technology is already transforming the way we engage with information. Our communications tools are shifting the political landscape in ways far more profound than what is suggested by, on the positive side, MoveOn.org, or, on the negative side, Carnivore and its intrusive, controlling peers. But while the consequences of living in a "network society" have received attention, in your writing and elsewhere, we've barely started to discuss how digital technology could evolve, over time, to contribute more effectively to democracy.

Software, by its nature, is programmable. So doesn't it make sense for civil society advocates to ask what we want software to achieve, see if the products available meet those objectives, and, if they don't, attempt to build ones that do? For some reason, especially since the late 1970s, the active assumption has been that business and government will design our digital communication infrastructure for the rest of us. Useful tools, it is assumed, will magically appear. Almost no one pays attention to the public interest issues around our communications tools until after the new technologies are introduced, and their

benefits or dangers become clear. Civil society groups like Creative Commons, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, and EPIC spend most of their energy reacting to technical innovations that have already been prototyped and released. It has been nearly a decade since the Web ushered in the era of popular digital culture, and we are increasingly aware of the capabilities inherent in information technology. But where are the civil society advocates who are proposing and developing next generation infrastructure and software in the public interest? I mean, not only faster bandwidth (or insuring the protection of freedoms we already have, like downloading media files), but new technology designed to better support democratic engagement in communities and governance.

GL: Given the importance of networks in society, and the way that networks contribute to democratic action by challenging traditional concentrations of power, you would expect attention to be given to the design of tools that improve the efficiency of creating human networks.

KJ: The Augmented Social Network is meant to be one such attempt. It focuses on the issue of how your identity is represented in the digital space, and what that representation should enable you to do. In particular, it addresses how to find others online with similar, relevant interests or expertise, in a context that engenders trust, so that you can form groups with them more effectively. It's a technical architecture for an Internet-wide system that enables appropriate introductions between people who share affinities through the recommendations of trusted third parties. It is Internet-wide - rather than a closed, proprietary system - in order to connect people across divergent social networks. It would also support the distribution of media and the creation of ad-hoc groups using the same Net-wide recommendation system.

GL: Could you give me an example of how it works?

KJ: We present a number of detailed scenarios in the white paper, but here's a simple example. Suppose you're working on a solar energy project and need to find someone with very specific expertise to answer a difficult question. You post the question to the three solar lists you are a member of, you use Google, but you don't find an answer. The ASN would allow you to pass the question forward through a targeted series of friends-of-friends who are solar experts, in a semi-automated manner, crossing the borders of distinct social networks, vastly increasing your chance of connecting with someone who can help you.

Another example: you are looking for someone to help execute a solar energy project in Honduras. You have lined up the funding, but you need an engineer on the ground in Honduras who has experience doing solar projects. The ASN would enable you to connect to an engineer with the appropriate expertise through a

series of third party recommendations, so you can feel with some certainty that this person can be trusted.

The idea is to take technology that is already developed, that already works, and put it to use in the public interest. It would require the adoption of a set of standards and protocols, and the writing of some software applications. But the ASN is more the repurposing of existing technical systems than the invention of something new. And it would provide crucial functionality to support a wide range of progressive initiatives, from complimentary currencies to alternative media to chaordic (distributed) governance to grassroots organizing. When we presented the ASN at the Planetwork conference in San Francisco last June, its value in all these areas was apparent.

GL: Planetwork was a hybrid post dotcom and post 911 conference, that perhaps without GW Bush would not have taken place. Do you agree? It seems like an exciting coalition between technologists and activists. Hopefully more than a nostalgic return of the sixties.

KJ: The first Planetwork conference actually took place in May 2000charged by the energy that followed the WTO protests in Seattle. A number of people involved peripherally with the annual Bioneers conference, which focuses on new environmental technologies that promote sustainability, wanted to bring that work into a dialog with the emerging information technologies. There was a strong, visceral sense, especially after Seattle, that we need to shape a practical alternative to top down, corporate globalizationand that this alternative has to be grounded in emerging technologies.

There's been a bias on the American left against computers, in general, and the potential for digital communications to contribute to civil society, in particular. In the popular left imagination, computers start with two strikes against them: they were birthed by the military, and they spread through the relentless marketing of soulless corporations. Moreover, having access to computers meant an additional budget line for progressive groups already stretched too thin - which implied that they were tools for the privileged. The dot com boom only reinforced this impression, with its emphasis on stock options rather than the public good. For these and other related reasons, there wasn't much contact between progressives working on issues like the environment or global justice, and IT professionals in Silicon Valley.

Planetwork deliberately aimed to make links between these two cultures. Some 500 people attended the conference. I wasn't there, but I heard from many who went that it was a galvanizing moment, opening their eyes to possibilities they hadn't considered before.

GL: How exactly did Planetwork lead to the ASN proposal?

KJ: One of the people there was Brad DeGraf, a pioneer in computer animation. It struck him that what we need is a kind of green, global justice AOL, a communications infrastructure that would enable members to coordinate their actions politically, and aggregate their financial power into a force for change. He proposed this idea to two of the Planetwork organizers, Elizabeth Thompson and Jim Fournier, and various others he thought might be interested, including me. This led to a weekend brainstorming session among the redwoods in Ben Lomand, California, in September, 2000. 25 people attended, a mix of IT professionals, environmental activists, independent media pros, and a couple of experts in socially responsible investments. About two thirds came from the Bay Area, the rest from the East Coast.

It was a freewheeling, dynamic conversation - unlike anything any of us had been part of before. At the time, activists and technologists rarely discussed the blue sky possibilities for digital communications. Of course, by that point environmental groups has started to use the Internet the success of Seattle was due in good part to email and the Web; the IMC launched during Seattle - but in these cases activists were using existing tools already common in the business sector. They weren't thinking about next generation development of applications and infrastructure, the way IT people do. At the same time, IT engineers rarely discussed with activists their long term strategic objectives, how they intend to build a movement.

GL: Even today we face a gap between digital and activists worlds, isnt?

KJ: This first meeting of the group, affectionately nicknamed the Web Cabal, led to another half dozen convenings in San Francisco and New York over the next year. The initial 25 participants extended to a total of about 50. We quickly moved away from the notion of a centralized, AOL-like infrastructure to exploring different models for a distributed, global, targeted communications networka next-generation Internet honed to serve civil society. This system would not only provide a platform for activists (and all citizens) to meet, communicate, and organize much more effectively, it would encourage the use of complementary currencies and other alternative forms of exchange.

In early 2002, two Cabalists, Jan Hauser and Steven Foster, were asked to write a white paper describing the rough technical architecture such a system would require. While many in the group contributed ideas, Jan and Steve had done most of the heavy lifting to map a practical technical architecture. Jan had been a chief architect at Sun for 15 years, and Steven is the matching technologies expert who

did Veronica, the popular pre-Web Internet search engine. At the Planetwork conference, actually, Jan gave a keynote speech that proposed an interactive P2P communications infrastructure as an alternative to centralized, hierarchical, broadcast media. The ASN brought together ideas Jan had been playing with for a while. The two finished a draft in the summer of 2002. I began to write a new version of the white paper in the fall, made the politics overt, added theory and context, while referring to their technical draft and consulting with them and Neil Sieling - another Cabalista for feedback.

A draft of the paper, titled "The Augmented Social Network: Building Identity and Trust into the Next-Generation Internet," was circulated to the Web Cabalnow formally named LinkTank in the spring of 2003, and Jim and Elizabeth decided to make it the centrepiece of the second Planetwork conference, which was set for June. Jan, Steven and I presented the paper there, and it was later published by the web journal First Monday.

GL: Where is the ASN initiative at the moment?

KJ: The ASN is a blue sky vision for the future of online community. It stakes out some conceptual territory, presenting a civil society vision of how the Internet could evolve - particularly addressing the issues of Identity and Trust (two packed terms that have a pretty specific meaning in this context). It provides a clear alternative to the dangerous direction the Internet may well be heading in - a corporate/government panopticon. But it's not enough to stand against digital disempowerment and control; we need to stand *for* something. The ASN shows that by coordinating the writing of standards and protocols between several different, previously separate technical areas (persistent identity, interoperability between community infrastructures, matching technologies, and brokering) you could add a layer of functionality to the Internet that would be greatly in the public interest. The ASN is not a piece of software or a product. Building a single application won't make the ASN come into being. It's not something you can write a business plan around, because the intention is to introduce functionality that is in the public domain (like email). For that reason, it is hard to fund. At least, in today's environment.

Remarkably, there is no existing constituency to support IT projects of this scale that serve the needs of civil society. There are no venues, no institutions, where you can get support for a project that looks ahead five years and says: here's how we'd like to see the Internet's infrastructure develop in order to meet the challenges facing democracy. Universities don't support this kind of thing. Foundations don't know how to evaluate proposals for them. Everyone assumes that either: (1) the Internet and its core functionality are complete, the main development phase is over, and the only way it will change over time is to get

faster (which of course ignores the history of how the Internet was birthed and evolved, since the type of functionality supported by the Net changed considerably in its early decades; the Web, now considered a core functionality, wasn't introduced until the Net was 20 years old); or (2) industry (or genius hackers like Napster's Sean Fanning) will drive improvements to the Internet, so the public doesn't have to think too much about how it will evolve, because the market takes care of all things (which of course ignores the fact that the Net was initially designed by coordinated teams in the non-profit sector motivated to make something that contributes to the public good). The ASN doesn't require any "new plumbing" in the guts of the Internet. It's a meta-layer, basically, that goes on top of what's already there - as the Web did. But like other protocols and standards that make up the Internet and its core functionality, it proposes a new set of agreements that, together, would add useful tools to the Net - things that could increase the Internet's ability to support civil society.

We could put together a development program that would lead to the establishment and adoption of the ASN. In fact, we've got a draft of such a plan. But we found that there's no one to send it to. There's no obvious place to go for support.

GL: Why isnt ASN turning to the open source community or see itself part of it?

KJ: Open source development is fantastic for some things, and not so great for others. It's a less than ideal environment for the creation of complex systems that require a lot of coordination. Of course, the ASN depends on software that adheres to open standards. But the writing of the code, the development of the standards, requires a dedicated, coordinated team. Which is not something that happens easily on open source, volunteer projects. I'd love a bunch of kick ass programmers to prove me wrong by volunteering to crank ASN code!

When we wrote the paper, we hoped that the rationale behind the ASN would motivate the progressive foundations to spring some seed funding. Didn't happen. But what did happen was that the ASN inspired a lot of folks to think in new ways about the civil society implications of our communications infrastructure. Some of these people are developing projects inspired by the ASN. One of the more interesting projects comes out of the Social Science Research Council, spearheaded by Robert Latham. It's not the ASN per se, but it could help lead to the ASN. Another is a complimentary currency initiative called Interra, which uses information technology to help geographic-based communities to make better use of local resources and, at the same time, generate support for civil society initiatives. Greg Steltenpohl, the guy behind Interra, was also part of the Web Cabal. We also know of various commercial and non-profit efforts that intend to introduce aspects of the ASN into online community infrastructures

now in development. We're involved with some of them. But how that will turn out is hard to say....

GL: Why do you think identity and trust are the key problems of today?

KJ: Online identity is not an issue that we chose. Rather, as they say, it has been chosen for us. There are a number of industry-supported initiatives that intend to bring a market-centric notion of digital identity to the Internet, such as Liberty Alliance and Microsoft's WS-*. Which will win over its competition, and the exact way online identity will be handled, is far from clear. But much energy is now being devoted to setting standards for how individuals will be represented online - how aspects of your personal history will be aggregated into a persistent, digital identifier of some kind. Most of this stuff is not nefarious, or explicitly about control. Nonetheless, it lends itself to abuses that could threaten democracy. That's not an inevitable consequence, but it warrants concern.

It's also worth considering: do we want the Internet to devolve into little more than a virtual shopping mall? If online identity is narrowly designed only to facilitate your behavior as a consumer, and doesn't support the ways you act as an engaged citizen in a democracy, the future of the Net looks pretty bleak.

At the moment, there is no civil society voice at the table while these standards are being set - other than privacy advocates. Of course, privacy- the securing of our personal information so it is not used without our explicit consent - is critical. That's a given. But a civil society notion of online identity should do more than just protect privacy. It ought to encourage direct participation by citizens in their communities, and with their government.

GL: We managed to get along fine for all these years without a global approach to digital identity. Is it really such a problem?

KJ: The pioneers of digital communications, like Doug Engelbart and Alan Kay, didn't give much thought to identity. Back in the 1960s, Engelbart's oNLine System (NLS) assigned each user a non-transferable identificationit didn't allow for anonymity, nor did Engelbart assume that users would want to be anonymous. Online communications, in the beginning (say, 1965-72), were designed to facilitate trusted relationships between known peers. Most NLS users were based in Engelbart's lab at Stanford Research Institute; later the NLS was extended to other offices, but still every user was known in a broader social context. They were co-workers who knew each other. If someone acted in an untrustworthy fashion online, it led to consequences offline.

So much of how we communicate online today came out of the NLSincluding key

suppositions about how information and identity should be represented in bits. Engelbart somehow assumed that people interacting online would do so in a straightforward, trustworthy manner - there would be no separation between their online and offline identities, which were fully disclosed, always available. Engelbart's vision is of a system for digital communications that encourages a compassionate, connected society that values collective action, and is based on a high level of mutual trust between collaborators. The NLS was meant to serve groups of people participating openly toward shared objectives. For instance, the oNLine System would support the thousands of people collaborating on the design and manufacture of an airplaneor, more ambitiously, the international community of scientists working on complex problems like global warming. The representation of identity online, in these contexts, is a relatively straightforward matter. For that reason, our digital communication tools give us sophisticated ways to identify and organize documents, but not individualseven though the NLS (and the Internet, following NLS's example) was intended from the start to connect people to one another as much as it connects people to digital materials.

When the Internet was launched in the early 1970s, and Net-wide email came into use, the direct connection between online and offline identify began to fray. It became increasingly easy for people to represent themselves online with identities that were disconnected from their lives offline. Of course, this gave rise to some extraordinarily creative expressions of selfas sociologists like Sherry Turkle have written about. It led to a wide range of emerging social behaviors and artistic forms that are, at the least, valuableand for some, liberating. But it also lessened the degree of trust associated with online communications, particularly as the number of people using the Internet grew from the thousands, in the 1970s, to the many millions in the 90s. You could no longer assume that the person introducing herself to you online is who she says she is - as any AOL sex chat participant circa 1992 would attest.

GL: In this context, identity may be ambiguous. But that is far from saying trusted interactions don't take place. In fact, it's the opposite. Anonymity becomes a precondition to trust.

KJ: In many contexts, of course, this is a fine thing. In fact, anonymity online is one of the medium's great innovations. But there are instances when you do want to have a strong degree of assurance that the person you meet online is who she says she is. For those cases, you don't have many options for verifying identity in a social interaction.

But suppose you did. In what ways would you want to be known to others, so you could act as an engaged citizen more effectively? What would you want others to know about you? How would you like that information to be treated? In what

ways could digital tools help you find others with whom you could share information and collaborate - beyond what already exists today? These are the kinds of questions that lie behind the ASN. Online identity is an issue that civil society advocates need to address. It's time to put mind share and resources toward a forward-thinking approach to identity.

GL: Might it be better to do without any form of digital identityand to resist any effort to impose one on the enitre Internet community?

KJ: There is an industry and government led juggernaut to establish some form of digital identity - right now. Today. Digital identity management is a $2 billion a year business, and growing. Corporate tools for milking identity data for possible profit - including the resale of that data on the open market, and the aggregation of that data in centralized systems - are becoming very sophisticated. It's worth recalling that most of the uses of this information are benign: retailers keep track of your purchases in order to offer targeted discounts so you keep buying the same brand of toilet paper, for example. But once a system is in place, it can present a slippery slope to abuse. Of course, you could choose to drop off the grid, not have a credit or debit card, never rent a car (with its mandatory GSP device), etc. But for most of the population, that kind of resistance is not an option. It's not even clear that getting off the grid is an effective political response, given the challenges facing the planet. It may be a justifiable personal response, driven by disgust for technocratic consumerism, but it's lousy politics. It doesn't ignite change of the kind necessary to address the problems of six billion increasingly interconnected people. The fact is, the establishment of identity standards is already in full swing. It's happening. But it may not be too late to influence the direction it takes.

Once you start to design more sophisticated types of online group interaction (beyond what is common on the Net today), identity inevitably surfaces as an issue to be addressed. You can't facilitate a wide range of trusted interactions without the assurance that the person you meet online is who she says she is. Somehow, her identity has to be verifiable. For that threshold of certainty to be reached, for that mechanism to be in place, most of the concerns people have about the controlling potential of a corrupt identity system will have had to be dealt with. And if you can deal with those concerns, you may as well start to think proactively about what to layer into the system that supports democracy - because the untapped potential there is tremendous.

GL: Some of the ideas of the ASN seem to be present in new flavors of social software. How does the ASN compare to websites like Friendster, LinkedIn, or Orkut?

KJ: Frankly, as interesting as some of these sites are, they fall far short of what the ASN would do. They are like small toy versions of the ASN, with relatively limited utility. To begin with, they are not interoperable. They're all "walled gardens." The profile information and the relationships that you accumulate on one site are not transferable to others. In addition, these "walled gardens" tend to have profiles that are narrowly focused around a handful of interests. But if you happen to be expert in several different areas, each of which is addressed by a separate social networking site, useful connections made on one site will not spill over to another. The ASN would make the connection between "friends of friends" Internet-wideit would connect people across disparate social networks. Secondly, the profile info on these sites is thin. It is not nuanced. The same profile info you hope will attract a date can be read by your mother or your boss (as Danah Boyd points out in an analysis of Friendster). Your digital representation should be context sensitive. Moreover, the profile information on those sites is static. It's not effected by your actions on other websites, by decisions you make during the course of your day, etc. Whereas, a dynamically updated profile would be more accurate and useful. Third, one of the intents behind the ASN is to give you greater control over your own profile information; it's a system for profile management. It calls for a new class of services: identity brokers. These services would manage and update your profile info on your behalf as you instruct them to. Along with the creation of identity brokers should come a "digital bill or rights". You should be able to decide who has access to your profile info and who doesn't. You should own that info. You should be able to manage your "profile accounts" with great flexibility - trusting the brokers you choose to use. That's not the way it works on these social networking sites, which basically treat the info they have about you as a class of "customer information." Lastly, the social network sites are exclusive, restricted groups. You have to be invited to join by a member. They are as much about keeping people out as making connections between those who are "in." By being Net-wide, the ASN helps to pull borders down, not put them up. The introduction of strangers through trusted third parties becomes something far more interesting when it's available to everyonelike email or web pagesthan when it's an exclusive club for a few.

GL: Suppose we need one, what would a civil society vision of a global digital identity look like?

KJ: What digital technology makes possible-inevitable-is that each of us will have at least one representation of ourselves that is continually present in digital space, acting on our behalf. Digital profiles are not passive. They respond to inquiries; they are interactive by design. We are not used to thinking of our identity as something that we can deliberately construct, but in the digital space, that construction will become increasingly frequent. What kind of attributes would you like to have exposed to others, and in what contexts should they be

exposed? Every person should be able to make that choice for his or herselfrather than having it made for us by companies or governments without our approval. Moreover, I have certain interestsin new environmental technologies, for instance, or in experimental theaterwhich are not addressed by profit-minded industries. Frankly, most of my interests are in quirky, fringe subjects that are essentially ignored by the market. I want to make sure that the systems for digital identity allow me to express those interests - including my political interests-and to network with others who share them. If we leave it up to the market, those subjects (and the billions of others like them) will simply be ignored.

GL: ASN seems like the product of a typical Californian blend of technologists, activists and business people. Is it more than a nostalgic return of the sixties?

KJ: I'm not one for nostalgia. But some aspects of the sixties wouldn't be so bad to bring backlike civic engagement, the notions that things can be better than they are and that every citizen is responsible for making it so. My sense, however, is that what's going on today draws as much from the critical theory of the eighties and nineties as it does from the sixties (tho maybe, since I'm "chairman of the board" of the theory publisher Semiotext(e), I'm biased...). Now that we've digested Foucault's critique of power, Baudrillard's dismantling of the "real," and Deleuze & Guattari's invocation of the rhizome, the question remains: what political options do we have before us that can forestall global environmental collapse while engaging citizens more effectively in the democratic process?

Information technology offers useful tools that weren't available to previous generations - tools that could conceivably change the way power operates within groups. To state the obvious: information equals power. Perhaps if information is distributed more effectively, power too could be better distributed throughout society. The notion that it is inevitable that power will aggregate in a few hands, corrupting those who have power, and contributing to a never-ending cycle of cynicism and oppression... maybe it's time to re-examine that assumption, using the critical apparatus shaped by Foucault, Deleuze, and others? It may be possible to apply some of what we've learned from critical theory to the design of new communication tools, which in turn could support new social and political forms. Is it possible to introduce systems of behavior that could keep us from blowing up the planet, while supporting our ability to act as individuals in a free society? It's not clear to me that the answer is a resounding yes. But the question certainly seems worth pursuing. This Spring, Elizabeth Thompson and I will launch a Planetwork Journal - on the Web, free - for examining this intersection between IT and governance, alternative economics, environmental technology, etc. Maybe I'm just naive. But, as I just said to my girlfriend, I like to cultivate my naivete.

GL: What struck me is the obsession with trust amongst peers. Why is that so important?

KJ: Trust is the basis of any community. This should go without saying. But for us lefties, it's useful to emphasise the role played by trust, because this focus leads to an appreciation of civic cooperation and the public sphere - which is quite removed from the dominant, neo-liberal mythology of the lone wolf individual, unfettered by government to pursue profits in the name of progress. Much of this free-market-uber-alles agenda seeks to undermine what's left of the commons, privatizing community assets while asserting that the commons has become obsolete. It's a drive against openness in government and self-sustaining communities. What had once been transparent in a community is put into private hands, and made oblique. By refocusing attention onto trust in society, we bring a deeper appreciation to what we share together, and the aspects of our community that require a collective commitment by all citizens.

In face-to-face relations, we have a myriad of ways to measure and engender trust. Online, however, our tools for establishing and maintaining trust are weak. The intent of the ASN is to use digital tools to extend the trust we place in those we know in the flesh to others we do not, in order to organize with them effectively toward mutual goals. If you could feel the kind of trust you have for friends-of-friends offline for the contacts you make online, that has great potential for creating valuable networks.

GL: It could also be a challenge to go out and meet your adversary. I am referring here to the work of the political philosopher Chantal Mouffe, whose critique of Third Way democratic (media) culture point at this possible reason of the current democratic deficit that people experience.

KJ: Perhaps, but ASN's focus is on standards, software, and protocols that bring people who share interests and compatible capabilities into contact. Whether some use it to seek out people they want a tussle with... that's up to them. But doing so would require deliberate effort. GL: What would an Internet look like that is no longer based on trust and consensus but seeks confrontation?

KJ: It would look kinda like what we've already got, no?

GL: No, I have to disagree with you here. The Net as we have it now is one that is based on trust and consensus. People are slowly but gently forced to only have exchanges with those they already know. What the 70s and 80s legacy of experts talking to themselves has done is create a huge wasteland, and as a response closed virtual communities have been created where this ideology of consensus still florishes. But no one really wants to deal any longer with the desert out

there. Take newsgroups. I dont think that a reintroduction of concepts like trust is going to turn these abadoned public spaces, these deserts, into oases.

KJ: But aren't you saying that the lack of trust on the Net has driven people to stick close to those they are familiar with, inside walled gardens, and to not wander far beyond their existing social networks? The point of the ASN is not to revive newsgroups, but rather to enable targeted connections between strangers who share interests in the context of a particular project. It is to provide a strategic doorway between walled gardens, to be used only under certain circumstances. The ASN introduction would take place as part of work toward a specific objective. That's what the architecture is meant to support - whether it gets used for other things as well, we'd have to see...

GL: But the Internet as it is now would not be possible without the engineering cultus of consensus.

KJ: Well, there's consensus on one level (the underlying technical infrastructure) and lack of consensus on another (the organization of content and the presentation of identity). The challenge is to introduce standards and protocols for the way information and identity is organized online that is an appropriate, logical extension of the way the technical infrastructure has developed. That is, it should be distributed, transparent, secure, enable interoperability, and adhere to open standards. The ASN is an architecture for one part of such a system. And it's meant to suggest the need for other similarly conceived initiatives.

GL: How does the ASN relate to Internet governance and the process around the World Summit of Information Society?

KJ: The ASN has got to be build using open standards. That's a given. You would want those standards and protocols to be approved by governance bodies such as the IETF and OASIS - where it's appropriate. Some of the standards necessary for the ASN have already been approved. But there are a ton of wonderful standards that have reached the approval stage that have never been adopted, or are not widely adopted. And adoption for the ASN is key. We think we could get it working in phases, start it with limited functionality among a group of online communities, and scale it up from there. How does this relate to the WSIS? There needs to be a civil society position on our digital infrastructure. The WSIS was supposed to be part of a process to bring that about. From what I've read (I wasn't there), the results were decidedly mixed. No question that access to the Net, the digital divide issue, is substantive and real. But to get bogged down in that carries great risks. We need to develop a progressive technology agenda that can match those of business and the Department of Homeland Security - one that looks at the same fundamental tools, and suggests how to configure them to

enhance citizenship. It's geeky stuff, but hugely necessary. Where is the funding to support this kind of work?

GL: The conversations amongst peers that the ASN supports may be useful for pragmatists that want to solve problems. But one of the dilemmas we actually face because of our media technology is social enclosures that the Net and its current architecture foster.

KJ: There is, of course, a concern that targeted media, such as blogs or narrowband broadcast networks, will further divide people from those who don't share their assumptions and opinions. Some critics write about an echo chamber effect, where you only get media you agree with. Is that what's happening today? I'm not so sure. A greater threat, to my mind, is the control of major media outlets by a shrinking number of global corporations. The problem isn't that, say, "conservatives" turn to one set of media outlets while "liberals" turn to another. The far greater problem is that the economics of the media business forces the creation of a handful of focus group-based target markets, and eliminates all content that doesn't fit within one of these pre-defined buckets. Independent, controversial, and idiosyncratic voices have an increasingly difficult time reaching a sizeable audience. This is a form of censorship, one that reinforces banal, conventional thinking.

The ASN is designed to help independent voices find audiences-in a decentralized, grassroots up manner. The Internet has already shown it can be used this way, of course. MoveOn.org and the Howard Dean campaign are everyone's favorite examples of this bottom up dynamic at work. But given the number of people online, success stories like these should be far more frequent. One reason they aren't is due to the fact that the Net, while it has a distributed infrastructure that allows for bottom up networking, is not designed to help you find relevant things quickly. As folks like Engelbart and Ted Nelson ad infinitum continue to insist, the Web isn't organized very well. What the ASN seeks to provide is a meta-layer of functionality that makes the Net far more effective at linking you to relevant people and media, based on your affinities and relationships. It's a networking enhancement that takes advantage of the distributed nature of the Internet, strengthening it by adding a strategic layer of trust.

Links:

Planetwork
http://www.planetwork.net

Augmented Social Network (ASN)
http://asn.planetwork.net/

Planetwork 2004 conference (San Francisco, June 5-6)
http://www.planetwork.net/2004conf/

Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality (anthology)
http://www.artmuseum.net/w2vr/