

Notes on Nation Building

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Eleven years ago, in the summer of 1997, I attended a conference at the MIT Media Lab about the intersection of education, technology and economic development. I was 20 at the time and was thrilled to be at the east coast epicentre of dotcom culture. There were educators from all over the world at the conference, as well as a small handful of young digitally savvy youth, of which I was a part. I was savvy at the time.

The conference held sessions on a wide variety of topics. There were keynote speeches, and breakfast and lunchtime conversations as you might expect. Educators from Africa explained that integrating digital technology into education was difficult when so many communities lacked electricity. Most Africans at the time had never even placed a phone call. This was news to me.) Educators from Costa Rica showed pilot projects where new technologies leapfrogged existing ones while promoting new models of learning; American researchers discussed how to better support student-centred-learning both abroad and locally.

Although many at the conference seemed to be focused on looking for funding, I remember one schoolteacher in particular who was just happy to be there and to share his experience. He was from a small village in the Canadian arctic and he enthusiastically described how an intermittent satellite data connection allowed his students to learn about other places and cultures through direct communication with children in other parts of the world. It was a complete shift in his community where kids suddenly became the bearers of great knowledge and could themselves become teach their elders.

The conference went on for a few days and it gradually tempered some of my previous attitudes. In amongst the all the technological determinism that I was so familiar with from the business world was a healthy dose of scepticism. I remember being struck by the idea from one African school administrator that child labour was actually very much a good and necessary part of life in his community. He complicated my previous notions of how and why the developed world provides aid to Africa.

Although much discussion was had about educational philosophies, very little concrete action was emerging. At one point Nicholas Negroponte (the founder of the MIT Media Lab and the host of the conference) brought the group of young delegates into the boardroom. “This conference is all fine and well,” I seem to remember him saying, “but you should understand the potential of this moment. You are the youth representatives here. This conference is about you. We have the resources of one of the top research labs in one of the best-funded schools in the most powerful country on earth at our disposal. Let’s do something with it.”

We sat in silence.

He encouraged us to brainstorm and ideas began floating around the room. We could connect cultures together on the internet. We could promote harmony through technology. Negroponte wasn’t satisfied. He wanted something more. Something bigger.

“You guys should create a country.”

More stunned silence.

But slowly our minds began to churn. Amongst the youth in the room, we represented the national identities of Canada, Ireland, Poland, Italy, the US, South Africa, Japan, and France. Intuitively, the idea really appealed to us. What teenager hasn’t felt silenced or misheard? What kid doesn’t feel like they live in a completely different world than their parents? We had just been handed the keys to our rich uncle’s Porsche and we were flush with possibility.

So we started sketching-out what our country might look like, and how it might work. It would be a country whose citizens were children. In fact, we thought, why not make all the children of the world automatically citizens of our country? We could enable this with the connective technologies of the Internet and backed by... backed by what? And what is a country anyway? The questions that emerged were as exciting as the possibility that we

might be able to define some answers and actually make this happen.

More questions began to emerge. What would the boundaries of this country be? Who is a child anyway? Is there a universal definition? Should each local culture set a definition? How could you identify someone's age and their identity online? What about places without access to computers and Internet? What about privacy and individual freedoms? Do children even want political power anyway? If so, would the country have a flag? A currency? What would we call it?

We were buzzing with enthusiasm and spent the next year developing the country, which we called *Nation.1* (although an alternative suggestion, *Nation1.0*, may have been wiser). We gave speeches at the Massachusetts State house and in a broadcast to the United Nations. We announced the country in *Wired* magazine. I learned how to administer a UNIX server that would become the only physical territory of the young country and the epicentre of our online conversations.

However, our young committee gradually lost steam as we stumbled through our massive task. We eventually handed the project over to a new group of young digital entrepreneurs who morphed *Nation.1* into a more active and realistic project. *Nation.1* made significant contributions to other youth empowerment movements already in play at that time and eventually merged with a larger, financially established project called Taking IT Global.

Although I stepped aside from our nation building effort to let a younger (and thus more native) group take control, the project uncovered a whole world of ideas the remain fascinating to this day. What are countries? What does sovereignty mean? What is an economy? What is money? How do people identify with their own nationality and the nationality of others? What gives each country its legitimacy? When did nationalism begin? What is it for? How is it misused? Do countries still matter?

Many of the unimplemented ideas for *Nation.1* remain objects worth revisiting, such as its voting system. All countries need to make decisions, so *Nation.1*'s system was to be not only be a democracy, but the most democratic democracy ever. A super-democracy. We, the young mailing list members of *Nation.1*, would act as the interim governing body until a formal system was in place. We considered that *Nation.1* might not even have formal politicians, just software governing the production of laws. All citizens might have access to create questions and vote on their answers. The priority of questions themselves could be voted on. We considered the use of proxy voters to take the role that politicians have in most societies today. Citizens would loan their voting rights to proxy voters for the sake of efficiency. There would be no four-year election cycle. Elections would happen continuously as often as there were questions that needed voting on, and as often as any citizen cared to participate.

John Perry Barlow, the co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, piped up at this point and spoke about President Franklin D. Roosevelt's inaugural use of opinion polling in governance, and the pitfalls of that approach. Barlow put in his support for a consensus-based approach to decision-making. I just couldn't grasp what he was saying at the time.

Our ideas for the technology of *Nation.1* revolved around the use of mailing lists, discussion boards and translation systems. Alan Kay suggested using a wiki to enable collaborative authoring of *Nation.1*, which I can see now fits perfectly with Barlow's emphasis on consensus over majority rule. This was three years before the start of Wikipedia. I ignored Alan and am I ever humbled by that mistake. When the inventor of Object-Oriented Programming and the Graphical User Interface gives you technology advice, don't question him: just listen.

Besides the architectural components of *Nation.1*, I wonder about the general notion of youth involvement in politics. I remember being so fervent in my own

ideologies when I was younger, but these days I wonder about how youth are used by adults for political ends. I wonder about how they have been used in politics historically and how the line between guiding children and using them for ulterior gain must be quite fuzzy. Children became significant agents of change in the second half of the twentieth century in their targeting as a legitimate market segment by advertisers. That targeting produced both a rise in purchasing power and in social leverage.

But perhaps children have always been agents of change in one way or another. Either way, it is worth noticing children who speak the well-rehearsed words of adults as well as noticing children who exhibit more assertive free-thinking, inquisitive spirits.

As a part of my research into this paper, I spent a lot of time reading through old email messages. This one forwarded from Negroponte remains particularly significant:

Dr. Negroponte,
Greetings from San José, Costa Rica. I did wonder on the consequences of having a world run by children through the Nation 1 model. I do believe children had the best chance of making a better world now than before. Not only because of science or technology. As professor and father you should know, why children need healthy parenting to learn, grow, feel and think. As Christian, I believe God expects us to be like children. Not grumpy, hurt or sad children, but good will, open and healthy whether physical, mentally or spiritually. To devise a nation with children under a project run by adults look to me suspicious. Think about it! You mentioned Okawa, president of Sega. Do you know one of his best toys is concerned with death and destruction an used widely by children who from

time to time reproduce crudely the behavior learned by playing such video games?

Nation.1 looks like a byproduct of guilt or remorse from those responsible for reproducing violence and conflict without peaceful resolution. If the adults helping out the project do believe in children, let's ban high tech toys submerged in violence, death and crime. That would be the best sign this is not just another manipulation of children, like those festival of the youth raised to the level of sacred on the former eastern block. Let's take children seriously. Help them to learn good values and be free from fuzzy consumption and moral defeat.

Sincerely
Juan Carlos Flores, M.A.
Father and son

The project of Nation.1 contains within it many important ideas relating to the present and future conditions of governance and the role that media and technology have to play in shaping future generations. This paper is just a starting point for further discussions, investigations and actions. Nation.1 was an effort in nation building whose history holds imaginative tangents for network culture as well as efforts towards the universal suffrage of young people everywhere.

"Nation.1." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 29 April 2008, 15:55 UTC. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nation.1>>.