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# TEXTS

## The Disappearance of Public Space on the Net

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The Internet was started in the 1970's by the U.S. Defense Department as a communications tool and is now being bought out by I.B.M., M.C.I. and other megaCorporations. April, 1995 marked the closing of the National Science Foundation's part of the internet, and signaled the beginning of the end of the publicly funded computer network infrastructure.

This race toward "privatization" is taking place behind closed doors and in corporate boardrooms, well outside the sphere of public debate, and threatens the very existence of free speech over electronic networks. Just as shopping malls are private property, where "freedom of speech" means that the owners of the property have the right to silence those with whom they disagree, often using their own [private security personnel](#) (rent-a cops), the private spaces on the internet will follow the same model. This is not just paranoia--there is already historical precedent to support this claim. In 1990, Prodigy, an online service owned jointly by Sears and IBM decided to charge higher rates for customers sending large volumes of email. When users posted notices protesting the limits on the amount of speech, and sent email to Prodigy's online advertisers threatening boycotts, Prodigy read and censored the messages and cancelled the users' accounts. A spokesman for Prodigy wrote an arrogant opinion piece in the New York (lies of our) Times stating that the company would continue restricting speech as it saw fit, including criticisms of the company.

The first course of action, of course, is to boycott the large corporate net providers such as America OnLine, Compu\$erve, Prodigy, E-World, and other "shopping malls" on the net. Support local, independent internet providers who give real internet access and do not restrict usage. Encourage others to cancel their accounts on the "malls" and to sign up with independent providers or get an account thorough a university (students and professors usually get free accounts on university servers). Some may resist giving up the "convenience" of these services because it's often more difficult to set up "real" internet access, and requires a bit more time to learn how to use it effectively. However, these should be more reasons to boycott the megamalls, who would rather keep you ignorant--shopping and playing games--than encourage you use your brains.

Participate in and support the growing number of independent sites on the World wide Web. Create sites and link to other independent sites. Take control of the web and create content--independent worldwide distribution is now in our hands. Establish a strong presence and make your voices heard before what is left of the public space on the internet is legislated away by the cronies of the Christian Right in government and the multinational corporations who want to create a global "virtual megaMall."

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