The New Information Proletariat and its Platform

A Class Study Project

by Devry Students

The following four short articles were written by students at the DeVry Institute of Technology in Chicago as part of a classroom exercise. The class was given the assignment of breaking up into groups, forming political parties, and developing a platform that spoke to current issues and pointed to solutions. One group--Anthony Graff, Robert Gehr, Noel Galang and Robert Thomas--decided to call themselves the NIP Party for the New Information Proletariat. They addressed the issues of education, temporary work, privacy and intellectual property rights.

Cy.Rev felt the papers merited publication as a fascinating example of how young people see the political and economic implications of information technology and how their consciousness is taking shape. If the NIP advocates are at all representative of an emerging trend, the future holds exciting possibilities for us all.

The New Information Proletariat's Stand on Intellectual Property Rights

Empowering the Digital Laborer

By Noel Galang

DeVry NIP Project

Imagine yourself giving a friend one of your favorite books, so that you can share your enjoyment and satisfaction with them. Now imagine yourself incarcerated for the infringement of a copyright law because of your generosity. When books become software, this is what can happen, even if this example is exaggerated. Under existing laws, software copyright infringements are considered serious instances of piracy and theft.

Who owns intellectual property, such as the flow of logic behind a computer program? How long can someone own an idea? What if someone else comes up with the same idea independently? These questions are an unprecedented outcome of the information age. In the area of property rights, they lead to two more critical questions: First, should something as abstract as logic be patented? Second, do patents of this nature hinder the evolution of the information age or violate the rights of workers in this field?

To answer the first question, let s assume there were no copyright laws. You and all your friends would have the same software. All you would have to do is gather your money together purchase one copy of the program and some disks. Of course some of you may not have the instruction manuals, but that's nothing a Xerox can't handle. From a business or reseller's standpoint, there would be no need to obtain a 20-user license agreement or purchase 20 copies to sell; one copy of the product would suffice.

Without the regulation of ownership, then, the opportunity for business to exploit the labor of the programmer increases. Without the right to protect intellectual effort, a programmer may become disempowered and poor. In addition, the absence of copyright laws may possibly affect the quality of future programs. In order to sustain an income, the programmer could deliberately downgrade the code, since more money can be made on maintenance and upgrades. So to protect the rights and well-being of the software laborer, as well as the quality of software, it is necessary to support the existence of copyright protection.

But can the existence of software copyrights ultimately lead down a similar path of unfairness? The patent laws were written to protect the hardworking entrepreneur; but these laws can also inhibit growth in the market and restrict the rights of consumers. First, copyrights prohibit growth by fostering an environment that suppresses standards and eliminates communication, which is crucial for evolution within this field.

For example, the company Compton s New Media was granted a patent, which allows them the control over most of the industry s popular methods of retrieving data from a multimedia database. Compton s has stated they will be expecting to receive royalties from multimedia hardware and software companies. These companies argue that the retrieval process used by Compton s is an industry standard. Compton s copyright does not allow others to grow without paying a royalty. This hoarding of information thus hinders the creation of standards, which is crucial for software development and should be accessible at no cost. The process of determining patents neglects any prior development work done by others; in fact, these prior ideas may become the next standard of development in the industry.

The NIP party moves to restructure the copyright system so that the inventor/worker is protected and ensures an environment where communication is facilitated without the fear of knowledge monopolies. First, the awarding of copyrights should be heavily scrutinized. The Patent and Trademark Commission should not only conduct the evaluation; it should also include individuals aware of developing standards in the information business, such as members of ANSI. Their job is to screen out any invalid or unfair patents. Unfair patents would be those that are not obviously new and innovative ideas, ideas that are currently widely in practice, and those ideas on their way to becoming standards. Second, the time of the patent should be shortened to prevent copyright abuse and info hoarding.

As time moves on and an intangible idea travels from mind to mind, its "belonging" to a solo entity becomes intangible itself. Once it's widely spread around, knowledge cannot be bottled back up and taken away. Ideas can also change and evolve into something completely different. Making all those who benefit from an idea pay a royalty after an undue period of time is unfair. Thus shorter patents are generally better. A patent with a one-year time constraint will put pressure on the owner to sell quickly before the patent expires and thereby circulate the idea. Finally, at the end of the copyright's term, the board should again decide if the idea is still innovative, has become standard, or is on its way to becoming common practice.

In conclusion, until we can get beyond scarcity and live in a world where money and ownership are not needed to spur growth and innovation in our society, the copyright system is needed. But it needs to be redesigned to take into account the current realities of the knowledge revolution.

The Clipper Chip and Privacy:

Keeping the Fox Out the Chicken Coop

By Rob Gehr

Devry NIP Project

Companies and individuals alike are using computers and networks to conduct not only their day-to-day affairs, but also to manage their business dealings with other establishments. Considering the sensitive nature of many of these dealings, it's no wonder that security and privacy are major issues.

The recent introduction of the "clipper chip" has intensified the debate. The encoded chip provides a government-standard encryption method for the safeguarding of your confidential documents. The government would like everyone to use their encryption method, boasting its cost effectiveness and strength. The only catch is, government and law officers have the right, with authorization, to decrypt your private documents as they see fit.

But are we going to let "Big Brother" interfere where it is neither wanted nor needed? By submitting to the clipper chip, we are welcoming government eyes into our homes and offices. If the clipper chip is widely accepted, what stops the government from simply tapping or hacking into the system of everyone it suspects of some crime or conspiracy and sorting through or monitoring everything in your archives?

The public does not need to have its private matters monitored or protected by the government. The government is once again taking the right of privacy away from the individual and giving it to a government organization.

The solution is simple: let the people be responsible for encrypting their own information. It is our belief that the rights of the individual should be protected, including the right to keep confidential information private. Instead of spending its time and money on privacy infringement, the government should concentrate its efforts on other problems.

By letting the public decide on its own method of encryption, the American people benefit in two ways. First, they keep their information safe from the prying eyes of people who would do them harm. Secondly, the economy benefits. When the public goes out and buys their own encryption devices, they circulate money into the economy and create jobs. It is therefore the policy of the NIP that the rights of the individual stay with the individual unless they are restricted by the due process of the courts. There should be no action on the part of the government to encourage or force any sort of government regulation on the encryption of information.

Computer and Network Access:

A Vital Step to Getting Equal Education for All

By Anthony Graff

DeVry NIP Project

The United States education system, as it currently exists, needs to be restructured so that the imbalances that are in place can be righted. Many inner city and rural education systems do not prepare their students to break the poverty cycle. School districts in wealthy areas do a much better job of preparing their students for the changing world

Although education is primarily a local issue, the New Information-age Proletariat (NIP) believes that more Federal Government resources should be committed to the nation's education system because a better educated nation is a safer, more productive, and equitable one. Better education, especially in less-advantaged areas, could lead to less crime, a better trained work force, and could prevent the social inequities that exist in this nation today by giving all Americans a fair chance at a decent life. The NIP would like to use Information Technology to address this issue.

The NIP believes that more Federal resources could be given to economically disadvantaged school districts. More tax dollars could be spent in areas that have trouble supporting a good school district, such as the inner city and rural areas. This would give everyone a chance to prosper in the changing world. Also, more resources could be devoted to programs such as Head Start, which prepare preschoolers to do better in school.

The NIP also feels that the Federal Government could introduce Information Technology into the classroom. One way to do this is to set up a national network similar to Internet, to which all schools would have access. This educational network (EDUNET) would be similar to CPSNET (Chicago Public School Network).

This network would be able to teach students new skills that would be marketable in the new work world. Students could learn how to program a computer and how to set up a computer network. Students could also learn business applications such as just-in-time inventory control, total quality management, word processing, spreadsheet setup, database applications, and the like. Students would have access to an enormous database of information. Special presentations would also be available to all schools. Students could also participate in interactive projects such as electronic "town meetings" with government officials and science projects such as deep sea exploration with unmanned submarines, or the space shuttle.

Operating a computer can be an educational tool in itself. Students must learn communication skills such as paragraph composition, grammar, and punctuation when they send electronic mail. Programming or troubleshooting a computer system also teaches students research skills because they must consult a reference manual.

The government must be careful not to impose too many regulations when setting up EDUNET. There should be no undue bureaucratic regulations, such as too much paperwork. The laws of the

land should place the only restrictions on what students can and cannot do on the network. The most effective way for students to learn is if access to the network is readily available and regular.

Perhaps one of the most important attributes of electronic education aids is that they are great equalizers. For one, setting up a system would not be cost prohibitive, because older computers could be used. The EDUNET would be in place. Volunteers could work with paid information managers to staff the system at a local and network level. Secondly, school computers would be the only ones available to students who come from economically disadvantaged homes. Thirdly, computers would allow communication between persons of different socio-economic backgrounds.

To conclude, the NIP believes that Information Technology can help improve the inequities that are currently present in the nation's education system. Proposals such as EDUNET would allow students from all different cultures and socio-economic backgrounds a chance to get ahead in the new Information Age. This, in turn, would make the country a safer, better, and more prosperous place to live for all.

Getting Better Wages, Benefits and Working Conditions for Cyberwork

Upgrading the New `Temp Workers'

By Robert Thomas

DeVry NIP Project

The Information Age has driven labor into a more service-oriented economy. Within this service oriented economy there is a great deal of temporary or part-time employment. Temporary work agencies have been providing companies with temporary or part-time employees as needed. Temporary employees are a financial dream for companies. Although wages and health benefits are within the bounds of the current law, they cannot keep pace with the constantly increasing standard of living. Most temporary workers are not paid by the quantity or quality of intellectual involvement that was dedicated to the service, but simply on an hourly basis.

SOLUTION:

The NIP would promote and implement a Dynamic Temporary Services Organization to allocate temporary employees to temporary services. The Dynamic Temporary Services Organization (DTSO) would provide a network in which employees would have access to multiple sources of job opportunities, by working though various temp agencies. This organization would be responsible for rewarding the employees with payment for the service.

Temporary employees would be provided with the option of forming a union. New information jobs are being created every day, so new classifications of the new service jobs need to be developed. Then collective bargaining would be held between the temporary employees union, the DTSO, and the companies who use temporary employment on a regular basis. Those companies who do not participate in this bargaining process must adhere to any agreements made when using temporary employment in the future.

Probably the most important issue to be focused on in the agreements should be fair wages. Reward of service should be paid in relation to the new job classification and the new types of service. Because these new jobs are more knowledge based, income is needed to compensate for the time spent acquiring that knowledge, as well as the temporary job itself.

Another problem with temporary wages is the opportunity for wage advancement or raises. A new way of raising employees' salaries in a shorter time span is required. Evaluation should be based on all of the work they have participated through all the work agencies. The total amount of yearly work should be the basis for higher wage rates based on their total experience.

Right-to-Work Laws would not include temporary or part-time employment. Any temporary or part-time employment must participate in the dynamic allocation of temporary work thus granting guaranteed health benefits and fair wages to all.

The New Information Age is changing technology faster than our social and political institutions can provide the proper organization. Service-producing industries were 76% of individual employment in 1990. We need to adapt to the new service labor force being conquered by the old labor problems.