# RAND Warns US Against CyberWar from the Left

By Jason Wehling / PNEWS

Since the last U.S. election, the political left has been sent reeling. We have been told that this victory spells a new revolution, a revolution for the right. Interestingly, a Rand Corporation researcher, David Ronfeldt, argues that, contrary to the impotence felt by many social activists, they have become an important and powerful force fuelled by the advent of the information revolution. Through computer and communication networks, especially via the worldwide Internet, grassroots campaigns have flourished, and government elites have taken notice.

Ronfeldt specializes in issues of national security, especially in the areas of Latin America and the impact of new information technologies. Ronfeldt and another colleague coined the term "netwar" a couple years ago in a Rand document entitled "Cyberwar is Coming!." "Netwars" are actions by autonomous groups in the context of this article, especially advocacy groups and social movements that use information networks to coordinate action to influence, change or fight government policy.

Ronfeldt's work became a flurry of discussion on the Internet in mid-March when Pacific News Service correspondent Joel Simon wrote an article about Ronfeldt's opinions on the influence of netwars on the political situation in Mexico.

According to Simon, Ronfeldt holds that the work of social activists on the Internet has had a large influence helping to coordinate the large demonstrations in Mexico City in support of the Zapatistas and the proliferation of EZLN communiques across the world. These actions, Ronfeldt argues, have allowed a network of groups that oppose the Mexican government to muster an international response, often within hours. This has forced the government to maintain the facade of negotiations with the EZLN and actually stopped the army from just going into Chiapas and brutally massacring the Zapatistas.

Ronfeldt is an employee of the notorious Rand Corporation. Rand is, and has been since its creation in 1948, a private appendage of the military industrial complex. Paul Dickson, author of the book Think Tanks, described Rand as the "first military think tank ... undoubtedly the most powerful research organization associated with the American military."

Ronfeldt has also written papers directly for the U.S. military on military communication and, more interestingly, for the Central Intelligence Agency on leadership analysis. It is obvious that the U.S. government and its military and intelligence wings are very interested in what the left is doing on the Internet.

## Too much' democracy

Ronfeldt argues that "the information revolution ... disrupts and erodes the hierarchies around which institutions are normally designed. It diffuses and redistributes power, often to the benefit of what may be considered weaker, smaller actors." Continuing, "multi-organizational networks ... mak[e] it possible for diverse, dispersed actors to communicate, consult, coordinate, and operate together across greater distances, and on the basis of more and better information than ever."

Ronfeldt emphasises that "some of the heaviest users of the new communications networks and technologies are progressive, center-left, and social activists ... [who work on] human rights, peace,

environmental, consumer, labor, immigration, racial and gender-based issues." Social activists are on the cutting edge of the new and powerful "network" system of organizing.

All governments have been extremely antagonistic to this effective use of information, especially from the political left. This position is best stated by Samuel Huntington, Harvard political science professor and author of the U.S. section of the Trilateral Commission's book-length study, The Crisis of Democracy. Huntington argued in 1975, "Some of the problems of governance in the United States today stem from an excess of democracy ... Needed, instead, is a greater degree of moderation of democracy." Huntington maintained that "the effective operation of a democratic political system usually requires some measure of apathy and non-involvement on the part of some individuals and groups ... this marginality on the part of some groups is inherently undemocratic but it is also one of the factors which has enabled democracy to function effectively." In other words, major U.S. policy makers feel democracies are acceptable if they are limited and not very democratic. To stop "excess of democracy," Huntington argued that limits should exist on the media. "There is also the need to assure government the right to withhold information at the source ... Journalists should develop their own standards of professionalism and create mechanisms, such as press councils, for enforcing these standards on themselves. The alternative could well be regulation by government."

If institutions like the major media need regulation, the idea of a free, uncontrolled flow of information on the Internet must mean that a new "crisis of democracy" has emerged in the eyes of the government elites.

Ronfeldt maintains that the lesson is clear: "Institutions can be defeated by networks, and it may take networks to counter networks." He argues that the U.S. government must completely reorganize itself, scrapping hierarchical organization for a more autonomous and decentralised system: a network. In this way, "We expect that ... netwar may be uniquely suited to fighting non-state actors."

Ronfeldt is basically arguing that the efforts of activists on computers have been very effective or at least have the potential. More importantly, he argues that the only way to counter this work is to follow the lead of social activists. Ronfeldt emphasised in a personal correspondence that the "information revolution is also strengthening civil-society actors in many positive ways, and moreover that netwar is not necessarily a bad' thing that necessarily is a threat' to U.S. or other interests. It depends."

At the same time, the left should understand the important implications of Ronfeldt's work: government elites are not only watching these actions, but are also attempting to work against them.

## Watch Out for Attacks

Because of the very nature of the Internet and these growing communication networks, the issues are inherently international. It is important to watch for attacks on these networks wherever they occur. And occur they have. Since the beginning of this year, a number of computer networks, so far confined to Europe, have been attacked or completely shut down.

In Italy on February 28, members of the Carabinieri Anti-Crime Special Operations Group raided the homes of a number of activists many active in the anarchist movement. They confiscated journals, magazines, pamphlets, diaries, and video tapes. They also took their personal computers, one of which hosted "BITS Against the Empire," a node of Cybernet and Fidonet networks. The warrant ridiculously charged them for "association with intent to subvert the democratic order," carrying a penalty of seven to fifteen years imprisonment for a conviction.

In the United Kingdom, a number of computer networks have been attacked. The Terminal Boredom bulletin board system (BBS) in Scotland was shut down by police after the arrest of a hacker who was affiliated with the BBS. Spunk Press, the largest anarchist archive of published material catalogued on computer networks, also of the UK, has faced a media barrage which has falsely accused it of working with terrorists like the Red Army Faction of Germany, of providing recipes for making bombs and of coordinating the "disruption of schools, looting of shops and attacks on multinational firms."

It is not coincidence that this attack has started first against anarchists and libertarian socialists. They are currently one of the most organised political grouping on the Internet. According to Ronfeldt's thesis, this makes perfect sense. Who best can exploit a system that "erodes hierarchy" and requires the co-ordination of decentralized, autonomous groups in co-operative actions other than anarchists and libertarian socialists?

In the U.S., a number of bills are before Congress that would affect a large number of political views. One aims to change the FBI charter so that it can investigate political groups. It has bipartisan support. Even more sinister as far as computer networks are concerned is S314. This bill would prohibit not only individual speech that is "obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy, or indecent," but would prohibit any provider of telecommunications service (such as an Internet provider) from carrying such traffic, under threat of stiff penalties: $100,000 or two years in prison.

According to the Center for Democracy and Technology, "The bill would compel service providers to choose between severely restricting the activities of their subscribers or completely shutting down their Email, Internet access and conferencing services under the threat of criminal liability." The government is not the only institution to notice the power of the Internet in the hands of activists. The Washington Post ("Mexican Rebels Using a High-Tech Weapon; Internet Helps Rally Support"), Newsweek ("When Words are the Best Weapon: How the Rebels Use the Internet and Satellite TV") and even CNN (Sunday, February 26) have done stories about the importance of the Internet and network communication organization with respect to the Zapatistas.

The mainstream media aren't interested in the information that circulates across the Internet. No, they are interested in sensationalizing the activity, even demonizing it. They correctly see that the "rebels" possess an incredibly powerful tool.

A good example of this powerful tool is the incredible speed and range at which information travels the Internet about events concerning Mexico and the Zapatistas. When Alexander Cockburn wrote an article exposing a Chase Manhattan Bank memo about Chiapas and the Zapatistas in Counterpunch, only a small number of people read it because it is only a newsletter with a limited readership.

The memo was very important because it argued that "the [Mexican] government will need to eliminate the Zapatistas to demonstrate their effective control of the national territory and of security policy." This information was relatively ineffective when just confined to print. But when it was uploaded to the Internet, it suddenly reached a very large number of people. These people in turn co-ordinated a protest against the U.S. and Mexican governments and especially Chase Manhattan. Currently there are a myriad of social activist campaigns on the Internet. The network system of activism is not only working and working well, as Ronfeldt admits but growing. It is growing rapidly in numbers of people involved and in political and social effectiveness.

## Options

According to Ronfeldt's thesis, extreme measures such as S314 will not be the answer to the problems of elites. Actually destroying the Internet is not likely for a number of reasons. The opposition to such an undertaking would be too great.

A glimpse at the problem emerged when the U.S. government attempted last year to introduce the now infamous "clipper chip." This chip was to become the standard encryption for the U.S. The interesting part of the plan was that, while individuals, groups and corporations could send information across networks without fear of unwanted eyes peering into their documents, the government "clipper chip" would have a "backdoor" for intelligence agencies like the FBI. In other words, it was safe to all except the government, which would be able to read any message it wanted to.

The Clinton administration had little support, aside from the FBI, CIA, National Security Agency (NSA) and AT&T, which was contracted to manufacture the chip.

According to Ronfeldt's thesis, dismantling the Internet is not even an option. The Internet and "netwars" are here to stay. The trick is to be better at it than groups the U.S. government opposes. That means creating government networks that can be more effective than those networks that have been created and maintained by social activists.

Of course, this has inherent problems of its own. How will U.S. military leaders react when they hear that the military must "erode" its system of hierarchy to evolve into a decentralized and autonomous network of smaller parts? Certainly there is a paradox in Ronfeldt's arguments.

Much more likely, at least for the time being, is Huntington's notion of regulation of information. Currently, how laws should be applied to the Internet and other computer networks is vague and undefined.

One scenario is that the Internet would be subjected to U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulation. This might solve the problem voiced by Huntington where the government could create barriers and/or limit the free flow of information to better suit its wishes. Obviously for social activists, a much better scenario is that the Internet, as well as all other computer networks, would be placed in the category of "common carriers," where universal access is assured.

The battle lines are already being drawn. Under the guise of saving children from pedophiles, there is now a media campaign that pushes for regulation against pornography and other "obscenity" on the Internet. Last year, Carnegie-Mellon University attempted to restrict campus users from access to X-rated photographs on the Internet. Of course, if this comes to pass, it would be just the beginning the placement into the category of FCC regulation would be complete. On the other side are a large number of civil rights organizations like the ACLU and the Electronic Frontier Foundation who argue for the "common carrier" approach.

Another scenario is control, not via the government, but from private industry. Many people use the "highway" or "superhighway" analogy when describing the Internet. But a new analogy has emerged: the railroad or "super-railroad." Each has very important connotations: the highway is public, the railroad is private.

The problem springs from the growing pains that the Internet is experiencing. It is growing at a very rapid pace, so rapid that the "backbone" of the Net, the high-speed data transmission line over which information travels, is becoming outdated.

One proposal from ANS, a joint venture between IBM and MCI, is to privatize the Internet "backbone," thus creating "toll roads" for the Internet: they lay the new cables, they own them, and users will have to "pay as they go." The cost of communication would rise and would limit the ability of social activists and many other groups to participate in these "netwars."

This may be the long-term solution, paralleling the fate of last century's new form of popular communication, the newspaper. Faced with the same problem, a cheap and accessible medium for expressing ideas available to the general population, the initial response was to enforce laws limiting its use (e.g. censorship laws). However, coercion was soon abandoned in the face of better forces implicit in capitalism, namely the concentration of capital required to produce a commodity for a profit.

Market forces ensured that only those with access to vast amounts of money could start even a weekly newspaper. In addition, the need for advertising to run a paper ensured big business control over its content. Hence, for example, we could see mainstream journals having free access web sites on the Internet (funded entirely by advertising) while dissident publications will have to charge in order for their web sites to exist. This, however, is still some way into the future.

## What might we do?

It is clear that Rand, and possibly other wings of the establishment, are not only interested in what activists are doing on the Internet, but they think it is working. They are studying our behaviour and actions; we should study theirs. We should analyze their movements and attempt to anticipate attacks as much as possible.

As Ronfeldt argues repeatedly, the potential is there for us to be more effective. But we can do better than just a coordination of raw information, which has been the majority of the "networking" so far on the Internet. To improve on the work that is being done, we should attempt to provide more especially in the area of in-depth analysis.

We should attempt to co-ordinate the dissemination of solid analysis of important events. In this way members of the activist network will not only have the advantage of up-to-date information, but also a good background analysis of what each event means, politically, socially and/or economically.

In a communiqu, from the Zapatistas, written on March 17, Subcommandante Marcos reiterated the importance of this network coordination. It is obvious from his words that these networks are making a real difference. He said, "And we learned that ... No to war!' was said in Spain and in France and in Italy and in Germany and in Russia and in England and in Japan and in Korea and in Canada and in the United States and in Argentina and in Uruguay and in Chile and in Venezuela and in Brazil and in other parts where it wasn't said but it was thought. And so we saw that there are good people in many parts of the world ..."

Marcos obviously was touched by the fact that people have laboured all over the world for the Zapatista cause. So he closed the communiqu, with a personal thank you: "And we want to say to you, to everyone, thank you. And that if we had a flower we would give it to you ... and when they are old, then they can talk with the children and young people of their country that, I struggled for Mexico at the end of the Twentieth Century, and from over here I was there with them and I only know that they wanted what all human beings want, for it is not to be forgotten that they are human beings and for it to

be remembered what democracy, liberty and justice are, and I did not know their faces but I did know their hearts and it was the same as ours."'

[Abridged from an article originally distributed on the Internet.]