

## "COGNITIVE DISSIDENT"

*John Perry Barlow '69 rides fences  
on the electronic frontier*

by Lisa Greim '81  
(written for Wesleyan magazine, an alumni publication)

To the surprise of many who know him, John Perry Barlow '69 has become respectable.

In the last six years, Barlow, 46, has evolved from Wyoming cattle rancher into one of the nation's most outspoken computer experts and defenders of the right to digital freedom. He and Lotus Development Corp. founder Mitchell Kapor started the Electronic Frontier Foundation one snowy afternoon in Barlow's kitchen in Pinedale, Wyoming, a tiny town west of the Wind River Range of the Tetons.

"I don't know anyone else who is welcome at the White House, backstage at a Grateful Dead concert, at CIA headquarters, and at a convention of teenage hackers," says Howard Rheingold, author of *The Virtual Community*. "I listen to him carefully. I don't take everything as gospel, but I do take it all seriously."

In all he does, Barlow appears to get a huge charge out of being an anachronism, a Mormon kid turned acidhead turned farmer turned technological philosopher, "probably the only former Republican county chairman in America," he says, "willing to call himself a hippie mystic without lowering his voice."

He travels the world, lectures widely, and his writing has appeared in publications as disparate as *Mondo 2000* and the *New York Times*. But his outlaw reputation lingers: When Barlow's friends on *The WELL* (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), an on-line conferencing service, heard that he would meet at a prep school trustees meeting, many assumed he was there to subvert it. When I offered to deliver messages, *WELL* habitue and San Francisco Chronicle columnist Jon Carroll was succinct: "Tell him to return the thousand dollars, the Jeep and the case of condoms."

Barlow is, in fact, a trustee and an alumnus of the Fountain Valley School, perched on a hillside south of Colorado Springs. It's where he met Bob Weir, rhythm guitarist for the Grateful Dead and his songwriting partner on such tunes as "Mexicali Blues," "Estimated Prophet" and "I Need a Miracle."

Two hours of conversation with Barlow wend their way from Deadhead magic, to the soullessness of suburbia, to how he wore out the mouse buttons on his first Macintosh PowerBook. "Remember, I've spent most of my life working on tractors," he says, looking at his hands.

An honors graduate of the College of Letters, he founded the Wesleyan chapter of Students for a Democratic Society. His heroes and mentors include Provost and Professor of History Willie Kerr and novelist Paul Horgan, who, Barlow says, "taught me a lot about being a gentleman."

His electronic mail signature is "John Perry Barlow, Cognitive Dissident." On America On-Line, he describes his occupation as "troublemaker".

He likes his job. And he's good at it.

It's a state of minds. Or, possibly, in some more realized future condition, The State of Mind. It's the current phase of what I call The Great Work, the hard-wiring of collective consciousness, the end toward which, according to paleontologist/theologian Teilhard de Chardin, the great journey of evolution has been headed all these eons. It's almost certainly the most important thing to happen to information since Gutenberg let words out of the Abbey.

-- John Perry Barlow, Foreword, NetGuide: Your Map to the Services, Information and Entertainment on the Electronic Highway

Barlow may write like an angel and talk like a combination theologian and computer nerd, but he walks like a ranch hand -- the kind of rolling stride that tells you a man's wearing cowboy boots long before you look at his feet.

The Bar Cross Ranch is gone -- sold in 1988, a casualty of too many years of hard work for too little return. But the Western flavor of Barlow's persona remains. With his boots, he wears jeans, a shirt with a Navajo blanket design and a blazer the color of oatmeal. Conversation with him is spiced with references to cattle, baling wire, and just how cold northwestern Wyoming gets. When he pulls out a snapshot of his daughters from his wallet, the leather is frayed and duct-taped at the corners. The photo shows three rosy-cheeked girls -- Leah, now 11, Anna Winter, 9, and Amelia, 7 -- playing in the snow.

Barlow spends part of his time in Wyoming and San Francisco, but he has also migrated to New York. He keeps an apartment in Manhattan and labors at a book, Everything You Know Is Wrong, which he promised to Viking Penguin in 1989. "My editors at Viking thought that perhaps I would be more diligent about producing it under adult supervision," he says. "Frankly, what the book is really about is the difference between information and experience, and the more I've thought about it, the more I realized that I much prefer experience to information -- and a book is kind of the heart of the problem."

He compares experience to information by referring to the difference between a map and the terrain. And the disembodied world of Cyberspace -- where people meet, argue, make friends, conduct business, teach, learn, have sex, and die without taking their hands off the keyboard -- offers more of an opportunity to create and expand experience, Barlow believes, than can be found in the daily lives of many Americans.

"When I first encountered the WELL, I realized it was a place," says Barlow, who hooked up to the Sausalito, Calif.-based service in 1986. "It was a small town, kind of like the one that I came from." Members use a computer and modem to connect to the WELL, which -- like many similar enclaves on the Information Highway -- offers conferences on

hundreds of topics, from media ethics to potty training. It's one small part of the Internet, a vast interconnected web of millions of computers at universities, government agencies and commercial outposts around the world. Some 20 million people use the Internet; another 4 million subscribe to commercial online services such as America Online, CompuServe, Prodigy and the WELL. Both areas are growing, to use Barlow's words, "like kudzu."

Even President Clinton has an Internet address: [president@whitehouse.gov](mailto:president@whitehouse.gov). You can play Rotisserie Baseball on CompuServe, participate in the [alt.fan.amy-fisher](http://alt.fan.amy-fisher) or [comp.unix.wizards](http://comp.unix.wizards) Usenet groups, or check the soda machine at the Rochester Institute of Technology by fingering [drink@drink.csh.rit.edu](mailto:drink@drink.csh.rit.edu).

Like any small community, the WELL has structure and etiquette, gossip and legends, places to hang out, flirtations in dark corners, and people who cross the street to avoid each other. In the late 1980s, it even had a funeral, when a ubiquitous WELLbeing named Blair Newman committed "virtual suicide" by wiping out everything he had ever posted on the WELL, then killing himself for real.

But Cyberspace also resembles Barlow's home turf in Wyoming -- or Wyoming as it was in the 19th century. As he wrote in "Crime and Puzzlement," a 1990 essay for *Whole Earth Review*, "It is vast, unmapped, culturally and legally ambiguous, verbally terse (unless you happen to be a court stenographer), hard to get around in, and up for grabs. Large institutions already claim to own the place, but most of the actual natives are solitary and independent, sometimes to the point of sociopathy. It is, of course, a perfect breeding ground for both outlaws and new ideas about liberty."

Intrigued, Barlow got to know some of the natives, ranging from adolescent computer crackers to "aging techno-hippies." He was quoted in a *Harper's* forum about hacking which appeared just before Operation Sun Devil, a wide-ranging federal crackdown against suspected computer criminals. (Another forum participant, a 20-year-old called Acid Phreak, was visited by Secret Service agents. According to Barlow, they kicked down Acid's door, guns drawn, and confiscated anything that looked electronic, including music tapes and an answering machine. Two years later, he and four Cyberpunk counterparts were indicted on charges stemming from the alleged computer invasion of telephone companies and credit bureaus. Acid, whose real name is Elias Ladopoulos, was sentenced to six months in a federal prison.)

Not long after that, an FBI agent landed in Pinedale, wanting to talk to Barlow about a group calling itself the nuPrometheus League, who claimed to have stolen Apple source code, the stuff that drives the on-screen look of the Macintosh computer. Special Agent Richard Baxter's specialty was livestock rustling; Barlow spent much of the two-hour interview educating him about computers, showing him what source code looked like and downloading files from the WELL. He "didn't know a ROM chip from a Vise-Grip," Barlow wrote in *Whole Earth Review*. "He had come all the way to Pinedale to investigate a crime he didn't understand."

This strange interaction brought the problem of civil liberties in the computer age into sharp focus for Barlow. "The perfect bogeyman for

Modern Times is the Cyberpunk," he wrote. "He is so smart he makes you feel even more stupid than you usually do. He knows this complex country in which you're perpetually lost. . . . In a world where you and your wealth consist of nothing but beeps and boops of micro-voltage, he can steal all your assets in nanoseconds and then make you disappear."

Mitch Kapor read Barlow's tale on the WELL. The two had met when Barlow interviewed Kapor, former CEO of Lotus and developer of the Lotus 1-2-3 spreadsheet software, for MicroTimes, a computer magazine. They nurtured their relationship as virtual next-door neighbors on the WELL. Like Barlow, Kapor had been visited by the FBI, and like Barlow, he worried that when it came to Cyberspace, the Bill of Rights somehow had been suspended.

"When Mitch and I met, we had this weird sense that we'd somehow been up in the same saucer together, in spite of the fact that he was a nice Jewish boy from Long Island and I was not," Barlow recalls. "We had some of the same fundamental insights into the nature of the place, and both of us had a sense that there was a place there, and that people were living there. At that point, I don't think anybody else looked at it like that."

So in early 1990, while flying his private jet to California, Kapor literally dropped into Pinedale. The result of that day's discussion was the Electronic Frontier Foundation, the virtual equivalent of a neighborhood watch group.

What began as a "hacker defense fund" in June 1990 has evolved into a Washington-based lobbying, education and advocacy group. Its scope, as the Information Highway evolves from metaphor to reality, ranges from intellectual property to workplace privacy to on-line freedom of speech.

"We're the only people dealing with the legal and ethical and, dare I say, spiritual issues," Barlow says. "This is a place where you don't even take your body, and where all of the ways that you have of defining property no longer exist."

EFF advocates open architecture, universal access and deregulation of electronic information channels. It opposes such items as the FBI's digital telephony proposal, which would require that new communication technology be structured to facilitate wiretapping, and the Clipper Chip, a proposed encryption technology to which government agencies hold the key algorithm.

The Clinton administration's support of the Clipper Chip as an anti-terrorism device provoked Sixties-style wrath from Barlow in a recent issue of Wired. "Hey, I've never been a paranoid before. It's always seemed to me that most governments are too incompetent to keep a good plot strung together all the way from coffee break to quitting time. But I am now very nervous about the government of the United States of America. Because Bill'n'Al, whatever their other new paradigm virtues, have allowed the very old paradigm trogs of the Guardian Class to define as their highest duty the defense of America against an enemy that exists primarily in the imagination and is therefore capable of anything."

A third-generation Republican from the state that nurtured Senator Alan Simpson and former defense secretary Dick Cheney, Barlow now finds himself hanging around Washington, playing the part of Loyal Opposition. "The folks I've met in this White House seem extremely smart, conscious, and freedom-loving," he writes. "Hell, a lot of them are Deadheads."

"You imagine me sipping champagne from your boot/For a taste of your elegant pride/I may be going to hell in a bucket, babe/But at least I'm enjoying the ride." -- "Hell in a Bucket" (John Barlow/Bob Weir/Brent Myland), )1987 Ice Nine Publishing Co. Inc.

Young Bob Weir got kicked out of Fountain Valley School ("He hadn't done anything I hadn't done," Barlow recalls) and returned to the San Francisco area. Weir hooked up with Jerry Garcia, Phil Lesh and Bill Kreutzmann to form the Grateful Dead. Barlow flipped a coin while considering his college choices and wound up at Wesleyan.

Those years encompassed the Summer of Love, Kent State, the Chicago Seven. At Wesleyan, they were times of both change and profound unrest. "We really felt like these were mighty days," he says. "Wesleyan went on a huge party when I was there. They had all the money in the world, and it was just a crazy place. It was a fine thing for those of us who happened to be there for the bonfire."

Active in campus politics, enraged by the Vietnam War and stoned a good bit of the time, Barlow was the subject of one campus legend, which he confirms: that administrators tracked him to Boston before he could carry out a plan to use 25 pounds of explosives to blow himself up in Harvard Yard.

He worked on a novel with Horgan, took seminars with Jerzy Kosinski, Buckminster Fuller and John Cage. "It was like Athens," he recalled. "And I was burnt out. All I wanted to do was to take my motorcycle around to the girls' colleges of New England and recite poetry of my own composition and get laid."

After graduation, he went to India, then returned to finish the novel, which had been optioned by Horgan's publisher, Farrar, Straus & Giroux. "I came back and finished it as a completely different guy," he said. He had begun it as a tale of his forebears in Wyoming but ended with a story of people of his generation seeking answers in odd corners, like India and Haight-Ashbury. When Farrar, Straus turned it down, he put it aside.

He thought about law school, thought about writing, hung around New York "being just basically useless" and was on his way to Los Angeles to take a job with Warner Brothers, the Dead's record label, when he stopped at the Bar Cross and found chaos. His father had had a stroke; his mother struggled to run the ranch. The Bar Cross was half a million dollars in debt. Something in Barlow's character would not let him walk away, and so he found himself, for the next 17 years, being the one thing neither he nor anyone around him ever thought he would be: a cattle rancher in Sublette County, Wyoming.

I have lived most of my life in a small Wyoming town, where there is little of the privacy which both insulates and isolates suburbanites. Anyone in Pinedale who is interested in me or my doings can get most of that information in the Wrangler Cafe. Between them, any five customers could probably produce all that is known locally about me -- including a number of items that are well known but not true.

-- John Perry Barlow, in Communications of the ACM (Association for Computing Machinery), August 1991

In the beautiful but harsh terrain of western Wyoming, running a ranch is an excruciating way to make a living. It requires a continual balancing act between time, weather, cash and debt, snow and mud, humans and animals. Murphy's Law strikes viciously in this country: anything that can go wrong, will, right after the temperature falls to five below and your pick-up truck blows a gasket and gets repaired with something you kludge together out of spare parts. Barlow had to come to terms with all that, plus his neighbors, who thought of him for years as the spoiled-rotten, hell-raising, long-haired no-good son of the local state senator. It was not an easy life.

But in the cycles of ranch life, between calving and branding and haying, the spring cattle drive onto government land and the fall roundup to stubble fields after a winter's worth of hay has been baled, "I suddenly found myself with a sense of meaning and purpose that I hadn't had before," Barlow says. "It was stuff where you can see the results."

His interest in politics resurfaced; he served on the county zoning board, and made unsuccessful runs for county commission, school board and the seat in the Wyoming state senate once held by his father and grandfather. He married a woman he'd known since high school, and they started a family. And there was always the Grateful Dead connection, the songwriting partnership with Weir, occasional road trips, and a steady procession of Deadheads making the trek to Pinedale. "They're bummed," he says, "because I turn out to be an ordinary guy."

The turn in Barlow's checkered career came in the mid-1980s. He owned a Compaq PC clone, which he thought of as a glorified adding machine. The Apple Macintosh had been on the market for a few years, but like many PC users, Barlow scorned its "user-promiscuous" graphical interface, in which users steer around the screen with a hand-held mouse, choosing tasks and moving pieces of text by pointing to them.

"I was informed by Weir one day that we were supposed to go down to Apple and give a lecture on songwriting with the Macintosh," he says. "Which was poppycock, because neither of us used a Macintosh. I got in front of this audience at Apple, and I realized that these people were all Deadheads -- and you can't actually lie to a Deadhead, if you're in my position, or you shouldn't anyway. They're much too credulous. They'll believe anything you tell 'em."

So Barlow told them the truth: he used a legal pad. The people at Apple promptly sent him a Mac. "I thought, 'Great, my kids can play with it.' But there was something about being able to take that mouse,

and to reach into Cyberspace, that made a big difference."

Converted, Barlow signed up for The WELL, lured into its insanely popular Grateful Dead conferences by David Gans, author of several books about the band. "I wanted to be able to hang with the Deadheads as myself, find out what they're really thinking, engage in some kind of colloquy with them without having them get all reverential. The WELL turned out to be a beautiful place to do that, but once I got there, I found a lot of other stuff going on."

Barlow's move toward a writing career coincided with the need to make some decision about the Bar Cross, now a million dollars in debt in the midst of the worst economy the Rocky Mountain region had seen since the Great Depression. In 1988, he sold the land that his family had held for three generations, spent a year running it for the new owners, then moved into town with his wife, Elaine, and their daughters.

Not having to spend 80-hour weeks on ranching left him free to explore the on-line world, where it mattered little whether someone was in Wyoming, Washington or Tibet, for that matter. "One thing led to another," he says, "as it will, and the next thing I know I'm some sort of computer personality."

Despite his growing celebrity in Cyberspace -- he receives an average of 60 electronic messages a day -- Barlow makes himself relentlessly accessible. At the end of most communications he lists his current location, street addresses in both New York and Wyoming, two phones, two faxes, a beeper, a toll-free message number, two e-mail addresses (barlow@eff.org, barlow1@aol.com), a public-key encryption block in case anyone wants to send something in code, a pitch to join EFF, and this: "MAN PLANS, GOD LAUGHS."

"Faring thee well now/Let your life proceed by its own design/Nothing to tell now/Let the words be yours, I'm done with mine."

-- "Cassidy" (Barlow/Weir), )19xx Ice Nine Publishing Co. Inc.

Meanwhile, John Perry Barlow wanders both universes, the literal and the virtual, looking for new ways to apply Teilhard de Chardin's notion of collective consciousness. He's seen it happen in the traveling Deadhead culture, which blooms in whatever concert hall the band happens to play in; in small towns like Pinedale; and, these days, in Cyberspace.

He describes his current career as driven by whim, "randomly saying yes to things that show up for no good reason. You can lead a somewhat erratic life this way -- but it's a lot of fun."

Perhaps gathering motivation to keep working on the current book, Barlow re-read some of his college novel last summer and discovered it wasn't bad.

"It's about what happens when you don't have any frontiers any more," he says. "It's about what happens when your family trajectory has always been to be on the edge, and you finally run out of edges, which is essentially what happened to me and why I moved to Cyberspace."

"My family was not only always in agriculture, they were always in agriculture on freshly cleared land, and there is no more of that.

"So I have to put in my crop someplace else."