

## The Planet Project – Or Why The World-Wide Web Ain't So Worldwide

By Andrew Garib

It is quite ironic that 3Com's Planet Project, a 'global' poll whose goal is to 'cross the "Digital Divide" and reach out to all peoples', is exclusively found on the Internet.

Last month, 3Com Corporation, in association with several 'leading technology companies' - who according to 3Com have 'rallied behind 3Com's vision of a global community connected by technology' - began this world-wide Project, held between November 15 and 18. 3Com's goals - besides crassly commercializing the idea of the 'global village' - are, in short, to allow individuals with access to an internet-ready computer to reflect on 'global beliefs today' and to 'compare [their] views with the views of others.' 3Com also claims that the Planet Project and its parallel junior project, the Student Underground, are efforts to tear down the walls that divide those who don't have access to technology and those who do.

Well, at least for four days.

What 3Com doesn't mention is that the whole idea of an Internet poll, the very fact that the poll is being held online, makes it exclusive. Very few people on this planet have routine access to the Internet, let alone the Macromedia Flash plug-in required to view the animations on the Planet Project site. In fact, as many as one third of all people on earth have never used a telephone. So how can 3Com claim that this poll is indeed global, that it is 'a mirror to the world, revealing global beliefs today?' The fact is it can't, and the fact that all of 3Com's 'leading technology company' supporters are American firms should leave no doubt as to 3Com's all but altruistic intentions. Even within America, 3Com's supporting firms are concentrated in just two regions, Southern California and New England. And to add insult to injury, the languages the poll is offered in include neither Hindi nor Arabic, two of the most widely spoken languages on earth. 3Com isn't stupid - the poll targeted people who have access to the Internet, and therefore have the buying power to purchase anything found on the 3Com or any of the Project's supporters' websites. It is as simple as calling a poll global in order to more effectively hock some high-technology wares, all while looking the honest corporate citizen, and a true citizen of the global village at that.

In order to see just how ridiculous this poll really is, let's take a closer look at some of the questions. Question 19 of the "One World" section of the poll asks what currently causes the most stress in your life. In the results, 1% actually checked 'inadequate housing,' while 0% checked 'lack of food.' Seriously, how many people who have access to the Internet are complaining about inadequate housing or starvation?

Question 20 asks, "Where do you get your current information about the world?" When 25% of those polled answer 'The Internet', and when a ridiculous 43% say 'TV,' it doesn't take a Mennonite to realize that we are dealing with a pretty well-off group of people, especially considering that in India, comprising one sixth of the earth's population, there are only 65 televisions for every 1000 people according to the UN. By comparison, in Canada there are 710 TVs per 1000 people.

When questions include those asking how 'advances in computers and Internet technology' have affected your life (only 5% answered 'not really changed your life too much'), or when asked how one gets to school or work, 36% answer 'by car,' it should be

quite obvious that the audience for such a poll is more privileged than the average. In Brazil, China, and India there are less than 6 telephones for every 100 people, and in China and India 12 cars per 1000 people (compared to 61 telephones per 100 and 563 cars per 1000 in Canada).

Flashing images of multi-racial faces, offering polls in eight languages (the 3Com website doesn't specify if the 'Chinese' service offered is Cantonese or Mandarin), or throwing in token questions concerning whether the polled individual is properly fed and has adequate shelter, won't fool me as to 3Com's supposedly world-wide reach and altruistic intentions. For that matter, Cisco, Lucent, and Nortel fail to impress me with their multi-racial advertising schemes purporting images of supposedly globally minded companies. As for the ethnic-looking children in Cisco's television ad campaign asking in a non-descript non-European accent, 'are you ready?' (for the world telecommunication's industry to be dominated by two trillion-dollar North American companies?), the vast majority of the world wouldn't know what the hell they're talking about.

No matter how strong the push for the world's high-tech companies to bestow an image of the good global corporate citizen, there will always exist a 'Digital Divide' between those nations who have full access to the latest technologies and those who don't, as long as those countries are shut out from competition by overbearing US (and Canadian) corporations (not to mention poverty, corruption, and political oppression). Even for those living in the West, our underprivileged do not have the kind of access to technology the rich here enjoy. Nevertheless, we, in our wonderland of high-speed modems and super-fast processors may be too busy gulping down the latest and most interactive big business propaganda to ever notice the divide at all.

[http://www.3com.com/news/events/planet\\_project/](http://www.3com.com/news/events/planet_project/)  
<http://www.planetproject.com/>  
<http://www.un.org/Pubs/CyberSchoolBus/infonation>

#### A Sample of the Comparative Wealth of Nations (not by Adam Smith)

| Country        | Adult Illiteracy Rate (% , 1995) | Total GDP Per Capita (US\$, 1997) | Motor Vehicles (per 1,000 people) | Telephones (per 100 inhabitants, 1997) | Television receivers (per 1,000 inhabitants, 1990-99) |
|----------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| Brazil         | 16.8                             | 4930                              | 81                                | 2                                      | 223   |
| Canada         | -                                | 20082                             | 563                               | 60.9                                   | 710   |
| China          | 18.5                             | 745                               | 10                                | 5.6                                    | 321   |
| India          | 48                               | 402                               | 12                                | 1.9                                    | 65  |
| Iran           | 29                               | 2466                              | 23                                | 10.7                                   | 71  |
| United Kingdom | -                                | 21921                             | 426                               | 54                                     | 521   |
| United States  | -                                | 28789                             | 756                               | 64.4                                   | 806   |

Source: The United Nations (www.un.org). Copyright © 2000 United Nations Publications