

## The Human Strategist: Leapfrogging into the Global Future

Elaine Baran

**Elaine Baran** is president of Baraness Ventures in Santa Monica, CA. She consults in business and Internet strategy to a broad range of clients.

Where are we going? With household networks connecting our refrigerators to our electric toothbrushes, toilets that send emails and bodies starting to resemble Lt. Uhuru with a permanent commset—do we have an end in mind? I ask myself this question regularly as I strive to keep up with the latest technological advances and to stay ahead of the business strategy issues that result. I have lately come to the conclusion that we are, in fact, sailing on a momentous sea of change, but it is not the sea that so many business and technology strategists think we are on. Perhaps, like Columbus, we are not really sailing for the Orient. There is a different continent to which we are being called.

In early June, a commentary piece in the LA Times, written by Marc Cooper and reprinted from *The Nation*, drew my attention and shocked me into a new course of thought. It made the claim that "any talk about a wholesale switch-over of broadcasts from the airwaves to the Web is an absurd notion in a world in which 60% of its population has yet to make a single phone call." What gripped me was the staggering simplicity of this number (six-oh), with its images of young barefooted boys prodding emaciated cattle with sticks, and gap-toothed fishermen hauling their catches to market. How will THESE people be served by our technological revolution? And how are we to serve them with the work we do?

The statistics of Internet and e-commerce growth are adeptly documented by the media, the analysts, the CNBC's, and the Forrester's of our isolated technological world. We live in an age of media and analytical hype, which sometimes distorts the wide chasm between the haves and the have-nots. We hear that by 2005 there will be 975 million worldwide users of the internet, and that we've passed the 50% adoption rate in the United States and are rapidly heading for a 75% adoption rate. The missing part of the message is that those 975 million users will represent only 15% of the worldwide population. Even at the exorbitant growth rates predicted for the next 4 years, the adoption rate in the developing nations will still be a paltry 1%.

So where are we going astray? How will our technology start to serve the greater good of humanity, outside of all the hype and analysis? How will we reach the other 99% of the potential users? What is the change on the horizon that has the potential to blindsight us, while simultaneously changing all facets of life in our current civilization?

New technology is coming on board that will enable Third world populations to leapfrog into the global community of the 21st century, leveraging both the physical and knowledge-based infrastructure already created by the developed nations. The people of the developing world do not need 802.11b and interconnected devices – they need basic answers to age-old problems: how do I get help for my sick baby, how can we get clean water from our aging well, how can we construct better housing, what will this year's rainfall be and what's the best crop to plant, and how will I manage my life as I age?

There are solutions to these problems—solutions that will enable vast numbers of people to move up the economic food chain and into productive contribution to society, solutions which require only small, marginal increases in infrastructure development. These are the leapfrog solutions. These are the responsibilities of the strategists.

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### Why This Isn't Just The Digital Divide

I know that by this point you may be thinking of that over-used phrase *digital divide* – "that's all this is", you might say. Yet we business strategists can sometimes be so limited in our vision. We think that if we can just get computers for "the poor kids in East Palo Alto", then we'll have done our part to bring our children, and somehow the world's children, into the new global era. The "digital divide" is a convenient platitude that the ambitious subset of technophile America uses to cover the yawning chasm between where they are going and where the rest of the world still is. The "divide", however, is not a chasm to be crossed with used PC's and broadband in elementary schools. It is a call to action for innovative ways to use technology to leapfrog the limitations of previous technological evolutions which were never fully disseminated to the global population.

Our challenge, as strategists, isn't just to use our capabilities to sell CD's on-line, or to check the status of our tech-stock portfolios using our wireless PDA's. The bigger challenge is to use our creativity and technical prowess to sustain indigenous cultures, to enhance the fertile minds of children being born into an inter-connected world, and to create an environment where all people breathe freely (physically, economically, psychologically and politically.)

One would think from that last tirade that I am one of those liberal visionaries who believes that all business is evil and that subsidized social welfare is the protected "right" of the people. Far from it – Adam Smith and a Chicago business degree have formed the foundation of my thinking for too many years. A viable business needs to earn a profit and create economic value. Our economic evolution is indeed based on moral and social principles. There is great good to be had from the success of business endeavors, and the creation of wealth, while it may be unbalanced, still benefits all of society over time. Yet self-interested opportunism, when balanced with an enlightened understanding of political and social economics, could not sanction leaving behind 99% of the population. There is no question that our society is on the threshold of an amazing and dynamic expansion, unlike any in human history. The question is whether we're wise enough to make the most of it.

The greatest benefits will not be strictly economic or political, but human, as these new technologies enable smaller, indigenous solutions for local problems. People need to have the dignity of their lives maintained—to be able to contribute to their own well being and that of their families and communities. Local solutions enable this type of self-honoring involvement. We as business strategists are called to come up with imaginative and forward-looking ways of creating marginal value from the structures already in place—not just for the good of our employers and clients, but for the good of society as well.

**Leapfrogging:** To advance by jumping over intervening objects. Technology leapfrogs when it bypasses intervening evolutionary stages or processes and goes directly to a solution enabled by the most up-to-date developments. Often, current infrastructure build-out permits new users to leapfrog over established users due to new product cost efficiencies, availability and reliability as well as old product switching costs.

- Many parts of Asia have moved directly to cell phone usage, bypassing the installation of wired systems in remote areas of the world, while allowing improved access and reliability of signal
- Mobile medical units (a "doc in a box") make fully supplied hospital facilities rapidly available via airdrop to some of the most isolated places on earth, alleviating long supply chains and tendentious government regulation when necessary, and
- Genetically altered grains, while controversial, reduce the need to resolve age-old distribution issues in order to assure adequate food supplies throughout the impoverished world.

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### The Global Mandate for Action

"Think globally, act locally" is still a foundation for action. But unlike the conventional (or accepted) interpretation of this directive – "Think globally" means using our collective knowledge and technology to enable local solutions. The Developed world's demand for increasing infrastructure provides an opportunity for the rest of the world's people to piggyback along for the ride.

Lack of government-sponsored infrastructure need no longer limit access to what Forrester calls the four ubiquitous technologies – water, electricity, broadcast and information – defined as being ubiquitous, reliable and affordable:

- Micro-desalination plants using fuel-cell technology and bio-chemical advances will allow for ubiquitous fresh water;
- Power-generation will no longer rely solely on hydrocarbon powered devices whose fuel is controlled by cabalistic cartels of nationalistic (or tribal) leaders;
- "Broadcasting" ripped from the hands of government will free the minds of people to consider alternative political and economic structures, as witnessed by the use of instant messaging to spread political messages in some emerging countries; and,
- Information, which we now hold so dear, will be able to move into service of the greater good rather than the greater should.

There will still be problems. Despots will continue to thwart the efforts of the oppressed to gain a small measure of control over their lives. The transportation of scarce resources from areas of plenty to areas of need will still challenge our most thoughtful and resourceful minds. And individuals will continue to search for meaning in the midst of plenty.

But we will be moving forward. The Gaia that is our home will continue to evolve new ways of supporting her residents. We will still search the stars for answers. And some of us, the technophiles, will have a chance to make a true contribution to our children's future.

Come join us – the human strategists – as we sail onto the waters of this new future.

*The above article was written in August, well before the profoundly tragic events in New York and Washington. In light of those events, I worried that the message of hope and certainty might seem trite or naïve. We strategists and consultants want to "solve" problems. Yet here we are faced with a situation of such horrible magnitude that magic-bullet solutions are clearly impossible. But upon reflection, I realized that solutions will come from all fronts, that each of us must contribute what we can, and that as strategists, our capabilities lie in the long view – in making better the lives of individuals so that there is no fertile ground for the disaffected. The effort to unite must be greater than the effort to divide -- the human strategist is being called forward to the challenge. We've all experienced the power of one day, or one hour, or one minute – and the equal power of a small group of persons to change the world. Now is the time to start making a difference. This article stands as written. - eb*