

“The World Bank, IMF and the Internet”

This week the World Bank and International Monetary Fund will hold its Spring meetings in Washington, D.C. Participants will be graphically reminded of the clashes in Seattle last November as many of the same protesters plan to reassemble in Washington. One of the main concerns of these anti-globalization protesters is the uncontrolled spread of American influence abroad and the attendant smothering of the indigenous cultures of the very people for whom these two institutions claim to be in the business of protecting. At least in one area, the governors and executive directors of these organizations can find a productive way to be responsive to the concerns of the anti-globalization protesters and still further their missions: the Internet.

In the early 1990's, globalization was considered to be the key to the future of all countries and their economies. It is not as simple as that any longer. It is incumbent upon the “dot coms” to recognize, and indeed, celebrate diversity among cultural and ethnic identities and practices which should not (and, in any event, will not) disappear in the course of commercially exploiting their wares. This avenue is particularly apropos for United States-based companies which aspire to impact populations around the world. The World Bank's fairly new approach to its development mission—the Comprehensive Development Framework—melds directly into this philosophy. How better to protect—and even enhance—a culture than by assisting its governments, civil society and private sector, to “own” a comprehensive Internet-based strategy for rural, urban and private sector development. International monetary cooperation will naturally follow, facilitating the mission of the IMF. This sentiment should also be the philosophical basis of Internet companies whatever the situs.

There exists in most of the countries of the world outside of the United States and a very few western countries the very real fear that despite the good intentions of the international banking, trade and monetary institutions, national differences will be overwhelmed—not just economically, but culturally as well—and that the traditions that are the foundation of each country will be trampled. The Internet is the engine that can either contribute to this result, or protect against it. Contrary to what we saw in Seattle, and what we are likely to see in Washington, foreign citizens are not always vocal about their concerns, but concerns they have and these will be reflected in their attitude toward trade, including intellectual property trade, in the long run. *No, Thanks, Uncle Sam* and the other books of that ilk, reported in Sunday's New York Times, is reflective of the underlying resentment against things American because of the failure of world trade and economic bodies to recognize their responsibilities not just to make the world free of poverty or to promote international monetary cooperation and stability while the ethnic characteristics of the countries to which they are directing their attention and money, dissolve.

One of the most embarrassing moments of the music business's history occurred in the early 1990's when American record companies tried to stuff their useless LPs onto the new democracies of Eastern Europe—rather than seek to help those countries establish indigenous music companies of their own which would have the dual effect of strengthening their own economics and reinforcing, indeed rediscovering in some instances, their own cultures. If an Internet company operates without a conscious understanding of the world in which it seeks to operate, it can never realize its potential. Its best chance to succeed in the international community, therefore, is to integrate the characteristic strengths of the populations it seeks to reach. The World Trade Organization, the World Bank, the IMF—all of these institutions have a golden opportunity to welcome this unique moment in history to embrace a true multilateral philosophy that will for once effectively integrate economic assistance with the repudiation of compromises which denigrate the very culture they claim to be trying to help.

The fears that American companies—intentionally or unintentionally—will suppress native cultures and even languages by controlling the Internet are real. But we are still at the beginning of the Internet age. This is a particularly opportune time for American Internet companies as well as for the international economic institutions that manage the world economies to assimilate what is best for business and support the recognition of the societies from which, after all, they will derive their income. The disparate societies of the world can remain distinctly themselves even as they incorporate what is best about the technology that the Internet companies are offering to them.