

Point and Cast

By Jeff A. Taylor

Come March, the Arizona Democratic Party plans to let voters cast their ballots over the Internet in the state's presidential primary. It will be the first time cybervotes will be used in a real, buttons-and-balloons political contest.

Paper ballots will be used as well, but the hope is that cybervoting will appeal to voters too busy to trudge to a polling station to participate. One potential problem: Party officials have not yet supplied details on how they will ensure that some 8-year-old in Flagstaff, Arizona, doesn't vote 5,347 times for Bill Bradley.

But the party seems committed to the idea. It is already hyping the e-primary on its Web site, and pulling it off would be a great way to



demonstrate that the party gets the Internet and understands its potential.

If only that were so with self-appointed experts. "The technology to do what they want to do is child's play. The question is, 'Is Bubba ready for it?'" Phil Noble of Charleston, South Carolina, who bills himself as an Internet political consultant, told *The Washington Post*.

I Want My Skin TV

By Michael W. Lynch

Imagine if Congress mandated that *Playboy* subscribers could peruse their monthly morale booster only between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m.

The 1996 Communications Decency Act imposed much the same restriction on viewers of sexually explicit cable TV channels. Addressing the problem of "signal bleed," which can cause scrambled channels to appear clearly on a non-subscriber's television set, Congress ordered cable TV operators to fully scramble or block any channel that is primarily dedicated to sexually oriented programming. If that can't be accomplished, the cable companies must turn the signal off from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m.

The law was in effect from May 1997 until December 1998, when the U.S. District Court of the District of Delaware enjoined it in response to a challenge by Playboy Entertainment. During that time, every cable system in the country which experienced signal bleed simply turned off the Playboy Channel, Spice, and the like until 10 p.m. "If you had a monthly subscription, and there were some 150,000 of those before the law, you lost two-thirds of the value of your purchase," notes Robert Corn-Revere, an attorney for Playboy Entertainment.

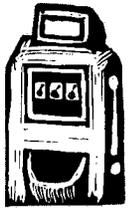
The blanket block isn't even necessary, Corn-Revere says. Another section of the CDA already requires cable operators to fix the problem for anyone who complains. There are also private solutions, such as setting the TV to block the channel or programming the remote to skip

Balance Sheet

By Jeff A. Taylor

ASSETS

- ▲ **Y2K.** Slot machines in Delaware, customs offices in Gambia, and some temporary blindness for Uncle Sam's spy satellites. Such is the awful, actual toll of the Y2K bug. The feds likely got their money's worth with the \$8 billion spent on Y2K readiness. For the private sector, the tens of billions spent on new software should pay off in productivity gains later.
- ▲ **Math Terror.** Despite the recent media attention, terrorism remains the remotest of threats to Americans. Dying at the hands of a terrorist is a one-in-15-million proposition, the RAND Corp. notes. Compare that to a one-in-6,000 chance of dying in a traffic mishap.
- ▲ **Gamed System.** Computer gamers go to market. Programmers who honed their coding skills on "dumb" games like Doom and Quake create new companies. One, 10-K Wizard Technology (www.10kwizard.com), uses a powerful search engine to trawl SEC filings for key words free of charge.
- ▲ **eVote.** Americans want a high-tech democracy. A *Wall Street Journal/NBC News* poll finds that 53 percent of the respondents want to be able to vote over the Internet. The campaign and the candidates have long been virtual: Why not the balloting?
- ▲ **Polling Papers.** The crush of a presidential campaign smokes out Vice President Al Gore on medical marijuana. Gore breaks with the Clinton administration and backs an option for doctors to prescribe ganja to ease pain and suffering.
- ▲ **Great White Dearth.** The single-payer Canadian health system is on life support. Quebec sends hundreds of cancer patients to the U.S. for treatment, and in Ontario the waiting list for MRIs is so long that humans will try a private veterinary clinic. More than 6,000 Canadian nurses have decamped to the United States.



over it. As for protecting children, two-thirds of U.S. homes have none.

Corn-Revere argued the case before the Supreme Court in November. A decision is expected by June.

French Farce

By Charles Paul Freund

France's filmmakers are among the world's most protected species—and, not coincidentally, among its most endangered.

French theaters must show French films for a minimum number of weeks each year, while French TV must devote a minimum number of hours to such films (with a separate quota for prime time). Nonetheless, audiences—yet to be state-mandated—have continued to dwindle, and now France's



QUOTES

"If you had to describe the century's geopolitics in one sentence, it could be a short one: Freedom won. **Free minds and free markets** prevailed over fascism and communism."

—Walter Isaacson, "Person of the Century: Who Mattered and Why," in the December 31 *Time*

"A more suitable choice [than Hitler for Person of the Century] would be... Franklin Roosevelt.... He rallied the power of free people and free enterprise to defeat fascism.... Henceforth, **the national government** (in the U.S. and most everywhere else) **took on the duty of managing the economy.**"

—Isaacson, later in the same article (*Time* declared Albert Einstein its Person of the Century.)

"It's a little bittersweet to see it end this way.... **But I don't think we're out of the woods until May or June.** Plenty of computer problems can turn up between now and then."

—Dennis Olson, a 41-year-old electrical engineer and computer consultant, reflecting on the \$20,000 he spent on food, water, medical supplies, and a generator in preparation for Y2K chaos, in the January 2 *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*

And who's to blame? "French critics are playing the role of gravediggers." Leconte characterized many reviews as "premeditated assassinations" written as if "to kill off all commercial French cinema designed for a mass audience."

French critics shot back in kind. During a roundtable on the matter, Olivier Seguret, critic for the left-wing newspaper *Libération*, said, "It is perhaps a truth that is unpleasant to hear, but isn't the average American film better than the average French film?" Other critics agreed.

In November, the filmmakers released a statement accusing French criticism of suffering a "crisis of intelligence and competence." The directors asked that "no negative review of a film be published before the weekend that follows its theater release."

The entire farce illustrates the rising costs of cultural protectionism. As economist Tyler Cowen put it in these pages, "Protection actually decreases an industry's chance of competing successfully," because "protected artifacts often lose their artistic and competitive vitality." (See "French Kiss-Off," July

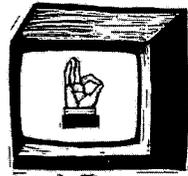
1998.) Some decades ago, French directors who made better films than Hollywood successfully attracted audiences and established a great cinematic tradition without protectionism. Though subsidies encouraged the American-influenced New Wave ▶



LIABILITIES

▼ **Cashing In.** State tax revenues grew nearly 6 percent in 1999, the Center for the Study of the States says. Personal income tax revenues led the way with an 8.1 percent rise. Some states return a portion of the loot with tax cuts, but most find new ways to spend.

▼ **Fed Creep.** First Lady and would-be Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton calls for uniform ratings system for TV, movies, and music. Such a "simple" rating system would help parents, she explains. But how to rate criminally silly ideas floated by politicians?



▼ **Money for Nothing.** The Justice Department's antitrust unit investigates MTV Networks, known threat to competition and economic well-being. In another case of the DOJ's picking sides, the feds are looking into complaints by record labels about MTV's demands for exclusive rights to videos.

▼ **Revolver Charge.** Washington, D.C., pumps money into the criminal economy with a loopy gun-buyback program. Many of the nearly 3,000 weapons the city buys for \$100 each are old and worth around \$30 on the street. Analysis by Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms fails to find any murder weapons in the city's haul.

▼ **Bad Seeds.** Lawsuit politics comes to the grocery store. Green activists launch a class action suit against Monsanto, the largest producer of genetically modified seeds. They claim the firm misled farmers by saying the seeds are safe and would be accepted by the public. The leading cause of consumer fears about the foods? The same green activists.

▼ **Which Doctors.** Bad psychologists may see little punishment for their misbehavior, as oversight boards nationwide revoke only a handful of licenses. Of the 670 psychologists disciplined nationally for sexual misconduct since 1971, 131 were allowed to continue practicing.

directors want protection from bad reviews.

According to a December account in *The New York Times*, France's directors have concluded that their industry is in crisis. In 1998, French movies attracted only 27 percent of the country's moviegoers, while U.S. films attracted 63 percent. Worse, nearly half the audience for French movies showed up for only three movies. Nearly all the remaining 145 French films produced last year were "navets," or bombs (the word literally means "turnips").

That trend continued throughout 1999.

"Since the fall, all French films have flopped," director Patrice Leconte wrote last October in a letter to his fellow filmmakers. "I see this auguring the collapse of French cinema in its entirety."

