

## **The end is to be let alone**

*A conversation with John Gilmore describes himself as a technologist who learned about business and became successful. After that he has focussed on civil liberties. He is entrepreneur, libertarian, hacker, cypherpunk, fighter for civil rights, and programmer.*

12 August 2001, HAL, Enschede, NL

C.S.: You unfold your activities in mainly two different fields which are the issues of online civil rights, security, privacy, encryption and a reform of drug politics. Am I right saying that there is a kind of relation for you between these two fields?

J.G.: There is no direct relation. It is just the way I approach them which is similar, because in both cases I am interested in civil rights. What I am doing in the drug realm is that I am taking things that I have learned about free expression, and good social policies out of the internet sphere and bring that into a sphere where people make policy about drugs.

C.S.: I found one quote from you which seems to be a key to the way you handle issues around privacy. It says: "I want a guarantee - with physics and mathematics, not just laws - that we can give ourselves things like real privacy of personal communications." My interpretation of this would be, that your strategy is mainly based on technological solutions and not so much on political.

J.G.: I think that the policy is created that the government and law have to take in account what technology can and cannot do, and where the technology can provide privacy, or can provide wide public access, or whatever. You can rely on technology to do that. Where technology can't, that's where you have to rely on laws. Technology tends to be better at proving things than laws do.

C.S.: Could you specify that a bit?

J.G.: Maybe I shouldn't make this generalisation, but as an example, in the early 90s when the internet had already existed for more than a decade, and I had been on it for more than a decade, doing computer research, the public didn't know much about it. And all these people were worried that we create a society where some people had access to the internet and others do not, that we do terrible things and create new class differences. From my technological background I knew that this would not happen, that the prices of all these things would come down dramatically ... that the prices of computers and access, the knowledge to use it would spread widely throughout the society. But there was no way to explain that to the old lefties who just believed that technology is evil, and that the government has to guarantee rights of

access, and all of that. What ultimately happened is that technology did, the price dropped, and everyone who wants to get on the internet can do so that pretty much.

C.S.: You are mainly working on technical solutions as a means to guarantee privacy. What are your concrete projects?

J.G.: I am leading and funding the creation of an IP security software for linux. This provides privacy of communication across the internet automatically for people who choose to run it. And we have a team of 4 or 5 programmers, a manager and a text writer, and they are all paid by me, and we give away all the software on the net.

C.S.: How will this software work? And what does it do?

J.G.: The IPSEC software encrypts each packet that flows across your Internet connection, if it is going to a place that also supports the IPSEC protocol. It is compatible with IPSEC implementations from other major vendors, such as Cisco. Our software is now in its tenth release. In earlier versions, you had to manually set up both ends of each encrypting connection, but in this version we have begun an 'opportunistic' protocol, in which each end can merely be configured once, and then future communication attempts from compatible sites will automatically encrypt the packets. Note that IPSEC doesn't keep your data secure or private on your computer itself; it merely prevents

wiretapping or modification as the data crosses the Internet.

See <http://www.freeswan.org> for overviews, details, and the software, all of which is free.

C.S.: How is the project structured?

J.G.: It does not have a formal structure. I initiated it and I pay for it. But this is just one example.

C.S.: Would you like to mention another one?

J.G.: Sure, I am on the board of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, and my major campaign there is working on the conflict between freedom and intellectual property protection. There we are defending 2600 Magazine, Prof. Ed Felton, working on the case of Dmitry Sklyarov, all of whom are threatened under a peculiarly bad law which was passed several years ago, called DMCA, Digital Millennium Copyright Act.

C.S.: How does your actual work for EFF look like? On what level are you operating?

J.G.: In two of these cases we provide legal support, by paying for the lawyers, in other cases we are advising the lawyers .... We're also doing press relation, things like that.

C.S.: The EFF is an us-american organisation and focussing on American matters. We do not have a comparable organisation in or for Europe.

J.G.: That's true. Many people at the conference here are talking about it, to create something like EFF for Europe.

C.S.: How did EFF start?

J.G.: It has been founded by Mitch Kapor, who is one of the founders of Lotus, and John Perry Barlow, and some other people. Mitch was getting frustrated at learning how the government was dealing with technology, and how they were chasing after teenagers who were using BBS, and really haven't done much if anything wrong.

EFF is a non-profit organisation which has existed for 11 years now, and has a budget of about 1-2 Mio \$ a year.

C.S.: Where does this money come from?

J.G.: All from donations. We have several thousand members and they send in money, and we also get larger gifts from private individuals or occasionally companies. And it is very helpful to work with well-known personalities, in the sense that if somebody who is well-known and respected works with us, it shows people that we maybe deserve some of this respect, too.

C.S.: Do you have partners?

J.G.: We always work together with other groups. In the United States we work with the American Civil Liberties Union a lot, with the Electronic Privacy Information Center, the Center for Democracy and Technology. Internationally, there is a whole global alliance of liberty groups called GILC, Global Internet Liberty Campaign, it's probably 40 or 50 organisations all over the world. We coordinate policies, make joint statements about global problems, internet policy etc.

C.S.: What I see, is a conflict between national laws and global activity, as laws are partly very different in each country. At the same time joint action is required, because the actual issues are pretty much the same everywhere. Do you think that GILC is governing this problematic sufficiently, or is there need for more work, and if yes, on what level? Is there anything missing in the structure of getting organized?

J.G.: Most of the organisations around the world are only, run by volunteers; they do not really have the time or money to oppose initiatives by major governments or major companies that will be harmful to the public. So what's really missing, particularly in Europe is an organisation that knows enough about raising money to pay people to work on these issues full time. It is a unique situation here in Europe: You have all these national governments, which traditionally make all their own rules, and now there is a new government which is trying to impose a layer of influence and control. Clearly everybody who wants to influence legislation in Europe will try to influence it at the EU level, as they won't have to do the work in 15 countries. You can do it in one place. So it's great opportunity for corruption, for profit-seeking people to try to get rules passed that help them, and hurt the public. And so far, there is not much of an organized effort to oppose that.

C.S.: Europeans still have to get used to the idea that there is this new government and that is getting more and more real power over them. Additionally, what is typical for political processes in Brussels is that they seem to be very intransparent for various reasons...

Do you work together with people in Europe, let's say on the technological stuff or on political actions?

J.G.: Well, occasionally, but this time I mostly came to meet up with people who I know, and spend some time on vacation in Amsterdam.

C.S.: Another strategy you have mentioned before, besides developing technological solutions is education of the public. How do you do this?

J.G.: Part of how I try to educate the public is by speaking out at conferences, by giving interviews to the press; EFF publishes a website where we talk about all of these issues, we have mailinglists where people discuss them, anyone can join in and have announcements from us or discussions with us.

C.S.: And what is the role of the public in the fight for privacy? Isn't it very much a discussion of specialists with politicians, and the general public is pretty ignorant?

J.G.: Well if they don't care about their privacy that's fine for them, but I do mind, if people read my private e-mail and my private diary. So I should have the right to mine, as well as them not having the right to mine.

C.S.: I have the impression that there is not much public awareness, and it is a question how to raise it.

J.G.: There is actually lots of awareness. People are very scared about their privacy. They don't know what to do about it, and I don't either in many cases. There was a survey from a year ago which said, that most people who had not done any business on the internet didn't do it, because they were afraid for their privacy. They didn't want to type their names and numbers into something on the internet, because they were afraid that it would get used maliciously against them.

C.S.: Once you have said, privacy is a means...

J.G.: a means to an end, right. And the end is to be left alone. To be left to be who you wanna be.

Published in: Mute Magazine, Critical Information Services, issue 21, September 2001