David Fearon, our new columnist, comes in from the cold to lament the loss of the Internet spirit.

Sold to the highest bidders

I should be happy, but I'm not. I recently returned from three months floating around in the Arctic (no, really) to find that the world has gone Internet barmy. Of course the computer press has been Internet barmy for years, but suddenly in the last quarter of 1999, the floodgates have opened and every other TV commercial is for a free ISP, telecoms company or website. The Internet has suddenly been introduced to the public at large.

But here's the problem. TV commercials aren't called commercials for nothing – they're designed to make money by selling a product or service. So watching TV could give the distorted view that the Internet is some kind of commercial venture.

Fair enough, you say, but it's not as though we've all suddenly become slavering consumers and forgotten the Internet's roots. No, stupid, not the packet-switched military network designed to weather a nuclear attack: the other set of roots, the one where the Internet is an

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academic tool for the free exchange of ideas, destined to unite humanity and transcend small-minded governmental boundaries, etc.

Well I know that, you know that, and millions of middle class 20-somethings around the world know that. But outside our technological bubble, the majority of the planet's six billion may not have been informed of the way The Future is supposed to be. And I'm not only talking about developing countries, I'm including the majority of Britain's population, who until 1999 knew little or nothing about the web, and cared even less.

Enter the Internet money-making machine, a force so powerful it's managed to warp the laws of economics, so that loss-making companies with no assets are valued at millions of pounds. The machine tells the consumers, via this sudden explosion of mass media marketing, that the Internet is for all things commercial, a gift from the gods when it comes to finding the lowest quote

on your insurance or picking up a last-minute flight.

I'm not denying this is a good thing; in fact it's a marvellous tool for saving us all time and money. But the vast majority of the public is being exposed to just this one, narrow definition of the web, because that's where all the money gets made.

Okay, so you can accuse me of being deliberately cynical here. Those free ISPs that I'm casting as the villains of the piece all offer free web space, so any member of the public can have the voice to say what they want to say and it'll reverberate around the world at the click of a mouse. Fine, but most people, we are constantly told, are unable to program their video recorders. Thus, any device more complex than a video recorder is going to make the experience of spending money over the Internet prohibitively tricky. That's why cheap web appliances, not complex, expensive, crash-prone PCs, are what Joe and Joanne Public need.

Ever tried sending an SMS message on your mobile phone? It's a pain, because the phone isn't really designed for it. Web appliances will suffer similarly, being designed for accessing information, not creating or sharing it, and despite what anyone says, publishing on the web is difficult whatever device you're using.

But, I hear you retort, an information access device doesn't have to be used exclusively for shopping. It can still be used for accessing all the information you would be able to access with a normal browser. True enough, but you can bet the companies that will be subsidising the boxes to connect to your TV aren't going to be particularly happy with people using their hardware in a manner that can't be turned into profit at the end of the day.

This is an exciting time. History is being made: the Internet revolution that we've been waffling on about since the early Nineties is actually happening. But I'm worried that the revolution is, at heart, one of economics, with the Internet merely the enabling technology. It feels like big business has been waiting in the wings, ready to pounce on the web and permanently hijack the thing for its own predictable agenda.

I hope I'm wrong – perhaps the Arctic cold has affected me more than I thought. But I think some radical action needs to be taken to keep the free spirit of the web from sinking without trace.

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