

News

User-watch

Case Studies

Trend-watch

People

Cyberquest

Index

Archives

Home

Fibre optics, friendship make this world



Sujata Srinivasan

SEVENTEEN-year old Terah De Jong and his friend Nick Moraitis are spending a busy summer in New York at the United Nations building.

First, it's lunch with the IBM Vice-President. Next, it's negotiating merger deals with the Global Youth Action Network (GYAN). And nope. These are no dotgone yuppies, but young idealists who believe that technology can channelise youth-power into making our world a better place.

De Jong is the President of a virtual nation on the Internet -- Nation One. Born in 1998

at the MIT Media Lab, Nation One has 350 virtual citizens" from 40 countries, all under the age of 25. Writes a young citizen on the site, www.nation1.org, "Thrown into this massive global community, our view of the world was radically altered. No longer was the Kosovo crisis a far away image on the 6.00 p.m. news, moderated by a friendly old man wearing a suit. Kosovo, Serbia, the countries of NATO, these were our countries. They were the countries of our friends who shared the situation, discussed and debated the issues on the Net, and with whom we began global action campaigns, multinational aid and fundraisings."

Built on friendships and fibre optics, this virtual nation" has a Constitution, complete with a preamble and a flag. With senior United Nations' officials on the virtual adult advisory board," Nation One's sponsors include corporate heavyweights Swatch and Sega. Ted Turner's fund has pumped in \$200,000 towards the multifaceted activities of the group. "Our annual budget is \$1 million and we are set to raise this by August. The funds will be deployed in projects across 120 countries," Nick Moraitis, Head, Fundraising, told eWorld.

Having met in youth forums and chat rooms in the virtual world, young people from across the globe meet up face-to-face and work alongside on short-term projects. For instance, Nation One has held youth conferences in Beijing and Puerto Rico, and from Sydney to Los Angeles. These virtual citizens have established the KidzBank to fund developmental projects across the world. Each year, young people are nominated for outstanding virtual service awards" in their community.

Theirs is a world where the seamless Web has made geographical boundaries redundant. Global, cross-border, cross-

cultural and cross-lingual communication is made possible with technology from Amikai. This enables real-time translation in Japanese, French, German, Italian and Spanish in chat rooms and message boards. Efforts are on to include more world languages. The Internet's role in youth awareness and community-decision-making is evident in Nation One's growth these last three years. Its board claims that this virtual nation has representatives in more countries than there are McDonald's restaurants!

Toronto-based TakingITGlobal, is set to develop the software for Nation One. In the long-term, technology, which is one of the main cores of the network, will be developed and maintained by youth employees, interns, and voluntary youth programmers. "At the moment, our technology is not perfect. But it works for basic communication. In the long-term, we're hoping to partner with many companies and research institutes, especially in India, for language translation. Nation One can provide a valuable testing bed for new technologies," says Terah De Jong.

Zeroing in on India

Nation One's taskforce from India includes Avni Gandhi and thirteen year-old Siddharth Sundar, an active member of the KidzBank. Pooja Aphale, a fifteen year-old, was a delegate to the MIT Junior Summit in 1998. Seventeen year-old Maitreyi Doshi, Secretary on the Board, is a student from Pune and moderates chat sessions on literacy and child labour.

India is high on Nation One's radar screen. Plans are on to open offices in four countries to begin with, and all countries in the future. "These action-access centers will work on global management tasks and also provide support to regional and local projects,

involving those with nil or limited Internet access. India is high on our priority list to start a centre. We have begun talks with companies such as Dishnet DSL for help with the technology aspect. We are very interested in working with other companies and organisations based in India since we are expanding our network there," says De Jong, who incidentally studied at the Kodaikanal International School and loves "a South-Indian sappaddu!"

The goal is to give young people pathways to make a positive difference and reach into the exciting world of youth activism through the Internet. Nation One is currently co-coordinating with GYAN, which has a network of youth organisations in 120 countries and collaborates with the UN. Adult advisors include Alan Kay of Walt Disney, Anne Sheeren and Jeff Zucker of Unicef, Carolyn Chin, formerly Vice-President at IBM and Executive Vice-President at Reuters, America, Seymour Papert, a scientist working on artificial intelligence at the MIT Media Lab, and Robbin Goodman, who developed PR strategies for IBM and Ameritrade.

Strength in numbers

Nation One is currently working on mergers with GYAN (www.youthlink.org) and TakingITGlobal(www.takingitglobal.org). "The implications of this merger are great for our respective projects which have very similar visions. In addition to the merger, we are trying to increase the use of the site by building a network of youth correspondents to report on news from a youth perspective, from around the globe" says De Jong. There are also plans to participate in the upcoming UN session on the Child in September.

The fact that much of the work has taken place throughout the world through the

Internet shows technology as a facilitating socio-economic tool. `` The challenge in our upcoming years will be to balance real-life offices with a large network of volunteers and people working through the Internet," says De Jong.

In the right hands, technology is bringing individual voices together in harmony. It's making our world smaller and closer by the day, fostering cross-cultural friendships. As funds get deployed into developmental projects across the globe, the challenge is to narrow the digital divide as much as possible, so that every voice that wants to be heard on the face of this earth, can and will be heard.

The author is a freelance writer.

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- [News](#) • [User-watch](#) • [Case Studies](#) • [Trend-watch](#) •
 - [People](#) • [Cyberquest](#) •

 - [Index](#) • [Archives](#) • [Home](#) •

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