

Common Dreams NEWSOCENTER

Breaking News & Views for the Progressive Community...

Tuesday October 3, 2000

NewsCenter | [NewsWire](#)

 [Share This Article With A Friend](#)

Featured Article

Published on Sunday, October 1, 2000 in the [London Observer](#)

Eating The Greens Electronics Giants Such As Sony Are Using The Internet To Hit Back At Troublesome Eco-Warriors by Burhan Wazir

Sony Corporation's products are the stuff of the Zeitgeist of the consumer age. Walkmans, Discmans, laptops and most recently WAP phones, marketed to the dance generation, have let Sony promote itself - despite the scale of its operations - as the funky face of global enterprise.

There have, of course, been a few hiccups in the company's glossy corporate image - notably George Michael's highly publicised and successful extrication from his Sony recording contract, amid accusations of Sony's suits stifling and bullying the creative urge. But it has done little to take the shine off a generation's favourite manufacturer. In Prague last week the eco-warriors weren't stomping their Walkmans. Anti-capitalist activists carried placards lambasting McDonald's, but it is the sort of stick Sony has avoided.

All that is likely to change, however, as news gets around that the entertainment and technology giant advocates spying on eco-friendly groups who criticise those same steak, ergonomic lines on its products.

It sounds like something out of a futuristic dystopia. It is also true. Earlier this summer, to representatives of the European Information and Communications Technology Industry Association in Brussels, Andrew Baynes, project manager at Sony International (Europe), made Sony's pitch against eco-activism. Sony's problem with the greens is this: its products contain toxins and are difficult to dispose of. Environmentalists would like tougher controls. Sony wants to avoid them.

Its strategy is outlined in a leaked paper currently doing the rounds of the alternative internet community. Titled 'NGO Strategy', it bears all the Cold War histrionics of J. Edgar Hoover's G-Men. The document discloses the names, contacts and internet addresses of leading environmental groups that pose a public relations threat to the company - the Northern Alliance for Sustainability, Greenpeace, the European Environment Bureau, the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition and Friends of the Earth.

The electronics industry, including Sony, has been fighting efforts by environmentalists who would prefer the manufacturers to take responsibility for environmental and health hazards of product disposal. In the EU, these efforts have culminated in the European Commission Directive on Waste from Electrical and Electronic Equipment - or WEEE. The proposed law would force manufacturers such as Sony to take financial responsibility for managing their products throughout their life cycle, a period that includes disposal. Compulsory targets for collection will be set in 2006 - when between 70 and 90 per cent by weight of all collected equipment must be recycled or re-used. The directive would further propose the phasing out by 2008 of mercury, lead, cadmium and other toxic chemicals commonly used by the

electronics industry.

The cost to the electronics industry could be astronomical. And since the European legislation surfaced several years ago, the American Electronic Association - an industrial umbrella organisation for more than 3,000 companies, including IBM, Microsoft, Motorola and Intel - has launched a major offensive against extended producer responsibility. The AEA says the legislation contradicts World Trade Organisation code.

Sony's presentation makes for sobering reading - after three global demonstrations in the last year, are NGOs still to be characterised as subversive operatives? 'NGO Activity to watch out for!' reads page five - with added links to literature published online by Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace. The environmental organisations are further identified as 'highly active' and 'well organised' with a 'global reach'.

'Don't wait!' is the mandate from the Sony report to company personnel. Sony's recommendation is the hiring of corporate press officers as rapid reaction units. And the preparation of industry-wide template responses - as opposed to the dribs and drabs of contradicting information usually associated with press offices.

So far, you might think, Sony's is the response indicative of any corporate behemoth facing the prospect of having to take responsibility for its products. But then follows the punch line. The presentation suggests the electronics industry employ 'web investigation agencies' as a solution to pesky online critics. London-based Infonic Plc are the web snoops recommended by Sony.

Infonic's website is a defiant call to arms for blue-chip companies besieged by online activists following the swell of protests in Seattle, Washington and, more recently, Prague. 'Suddenly a company's voice is no longer louder than that of its leading critics. Activists, customers, journalists and employees are talking to each other like never before, with big business finding it increasingly difficult to stay in the conversation.'

The internet detectives boast few morals in terms of the clients they take on. Infonic first rose to prominence when the company was hired by Shell International to decipher the internet as a barometer for public opinion in the aftermath of Greenpeace's victorious occupation of the Brent Spar oil platform in 1995. Other clients featured on the company website include British Airways, Levis Strauss & Co and Unilever.

The use of internet trawlers like Infonic to specifically monitor NGOs sets a precedent in the commercial sector. The monitoring of internet-friendly activists has, in recent years, taken on an alarming momentum. The Big Brother of internet investigation agencies, America's E:Watch, helps more than 800 of the world's largest corporations keep track of their reputations across cyberspace. A watchful eye on the antics of corporate protesters, naturally, is a priority. E:Watch clients include the H. J. Heinz company and Northwest Airlines. 'You'll hear rumours before they start to spread,' assures its website. 'You'll be among the first to find out about negative or inaccurate information - instead of the last.'

Commercial companies using internet detectives to snoop around the websites of their detractors? It sounds like an alarming development in the information war. Until now, the activities of protest groups have traditionally been monitored by governmental agencies. Last May, the Paris-based 'Intelligence Newsletter' reported that reserve units from US Army Intelligence were deployed to monitor the 16-18 April protests against the IMF and World Bank in Washington. The Pentagon sent around 700 men from the Intelligence and Security Command at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, to assist the Washington police on 17 April, including specialists in human and signals intelligence,' the report said.

According to the newsletter, activist files are being circulated via the Regional Information Sharing System, a networked database used by 5,300 law enforcement agencies in the US, the FBI, the US Drug Enforcement Administration, the Internal Revenue Service, the Secret Service, US Customs and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. The activities of anarchic groups detailed by RISS include findings on Greenpeace, the American Indian Movement and the Zapatista National Liberation Front.

Sony's advocacy of Infonic, on the face of it, might not amount to anything more than a smear campaign against the likes of Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. But environmental organisations that rely on funding for survival could find themselves crippled in the face of unsubstantiated rumours. 'People on the boards of foundations are very much part of the establishment,' says Iza Kruszewska, spokesperson for the Northern Alliance for Sustainability. 'Big corporations hold a powerful sway over their opinions on funding NGOs.'

The nervous shiver that characterises the language employed by the Sony report has been met with mild bemusement by the various environmental organisations named within its pages. California's Silicon Valley Toxic Coalition employs no more than 14 staffers at its San Jose offices. 'There's little need for web investigation agencies,' laughs Ted Smith, its executive director. 'We're hardly a Fortune 500 company. If they want to know anything about us, all Sony has to do is read our website.'

© Guardian Newspapers Limited 2000

###

**Common Dreams NewsCenter is a non-profit news service
providing breaking news and views for the Progressive Community.**

FAIR USE NOTICE: This site contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available in our efforts to advance understanding of environmental, political, human rights, economic, democracy, scientific, and social justice issues, etc. We believe this constitutes a 'fair use' of any such copyrighted material as provided for in section 107 of the US Copyright Law. In accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107, the material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving the included information for research and educational purposes. For more information go to: <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/17/107.shtml> If you wish to use copyrighted material from this site for purposes of your own that go beyond 'fair use', you must obtain permission from the copyright owner.

NewsCenter | NewsWire

[Search](#) | [Contacting Us](#) | [Sign-Up](#) | [Privacy](#)

Tell Us What You Think: editor@newscenter.org
Making News?: news@newscenter.org

© Copyrighted 1997-2000 All Rights Reserved. Common Dreams. www.commondreams.org