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## Around The Corner

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Mar. 20, 2006

We assembled an eclectic group of thinkers to identify the trends that will shape our future. It included an Internet entrepreneur who owns a basketball team, a mother who writes about the American family, a specialist in popular culture and an Op-Ed editor at a large city newspaper. We heard a fascinating conversation about how video games are making kids smarter, how consumers are turning into inventors and why some of us are taking longer showers. Listen to most of that discussion at [TIME.com](#) Here are some excerpts:

### •THE INTERNET

TIME: Two developments seem to be on the minds of those who are watching the Internet play a central role in our lives. One is how the user-consumer has become part of the creative process, and the other one is the degree to which we are being microniched and perhaps disconnecting from one another. Is that what's happening?

STEVEN JOHNSON: There are a number of really interesting phenomena that are happening all at the same time. In the middle, you have maybe the most interesting zone, and I just saw somebody call it "the magic middle," where you have people who started these blogs on specific topics like the azalea blog, the Porsche blog, whatever passions people have. And they have basically accumulated these readerships of maybe 1,000 to 20,000 people just by doing something they love for the fun of it. And they're starting to be able to make some money because the advertising people are starting to talk to these people, thanks to Google and other companies. In that zone, you have sort of professional-amateur authorships, with authors who are sort of half pros, half amateurs, who are not quitting their day jobs, but they're paying their bills with money they receive from this, and they're building little audiences. And that's just an extraordinary thing to see happen.

MARK CUBAN: In a world where there are unlimited choices, it makes it harder to gain an audience. And so what's happening is that in the magic middle, the pro-am world, it becomes a struggle to differentiate between what's a labor of love and what's a business.

TIME: Will anybody make the case that the Internet is not taking away our sense of

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community, just reorganizing it?

JOHNSON: What changed--and I think this is probably fine if not better--is that we no longer have unifying pseudoevents or -experiences like we used to. Now we'll unify for 9/11, but we won't for "Who shot J.R.?" And I think that's a sign of a culture growing up, and a sign that we're not going to have fake events.

TIME: Because the Internet has made us all joiners, have you found, Andrés, that the climate for sharing opinions has become tenser?

ANDRES MARTINEZ: Yeah, I'd say it's a very competitive world out there and very partisan. But in a sense, it's less lonely, because there are more communities, and it's easier to join them.

CAITLIN FLANAGAN: But are they enriching communities? Are they good communities?

MARTINEZ: It depends which community you pick. But I think the polarization is also exaggerated. Things are partisan, but it's superficial.

FLANAGAN: How do we know that?

MARTINEZ: Compared to other periods in our history, people aren't rioting in the streets. Even the bickering in Washington, a lot of it feels tactical--there's not much that separates the two parties on economic policy or even foreign policy. I think from the perspective of a lot of foreigners it's kind of like Visa vs. MasterCard. It's not that different. So I think a lot of this is overwrought.

JOHNSON: The idea that we are moving into the "daily me" idea--in which you have [the world] tailored to your particular sensibility and you're not being exposed to new ideas--is wrong. And, in fact, there was a Pew study a while ago that [showed that] people who spent more time online had more exposure to differing worldviews than people who didn't spend time online. And [that's because] we assume that exposure to differing viewpoints makes us more tolerant of those viewpoints. I just don't necessarily think that's true. If you're somebody on the left, and you're forced to listen to Rush Limbaugh, [you don't say,] "Oh, he does have a couple of good points." No, you say, "This guy is out of his mind."

TIME: Let's get back to the question of how are we going to innovate in the future. Our teenagers can get online and help their favorite softwaremaker make the next version of that software. At what point do the consumer and the maker merge into one entity? And what difference will that make if it's going to happen?

JOHNSON: There's this category that a guy at M.I.T. came up with. He coined this phrase "lead users." It's not quite right to call them early adopters because they're even kind of a step beyond that. They're the 1% or 2% of your kind of core, devoted fans that are not just buying your technology first, but they're figuring out all of the things it can do that you never thought of doing. To be able to sort of reach out and talk to that core part of the audience generating new ideas--that's a really powerful idea.

TIME: So what's the point of a company's having a director of research?

JOHNSON: They can filter some of those ideas, and they can come up with their own. And they know a lot of the constraints of actually producing these things in a way that the lead users don't. What you want is both.

CUBAN: And the reality is, those [ideas] are evolutionary, not revolutionary. The [big ideas] are from the inside, not from the outside. Yahoo! was struggling to grow as a search engine, and then Overture came around with pay-per-click, and that saved the entire search industry. And that created enough revenue for Google to become Google. Every step of the way there's something that comes along that changes the game. And that's when the fun happens.

TIME: In your book, Steve, you argue that our popular culture--in the form of movies, television and, in particular, video games--is actually making us smarter. How does that work? And does that mean some people will get smarter faster but others will get left behind faster?

JOHNSON: We're getting smarter in certain ways--pattern recognition, problem solving, abstract problem solving, system thinking, system analyzing with complex sort of multiple

variables, visual intelligence, obviously technological intelligence, ability to adapt to new interfaces and find the information you need. On all of those levels, kids are much brighter today than they were 20 or 30 years ago. And part of my argument is, if you're thinking about the office place of the future, what are the skills that are going to be the most important for those kids? Is it going to be mastering new interfaces and keeping complex virtual relationships alive and multitasking and managing to think about new technologies in interesting ways? Or is it going to be algebra skills? I think you'd have to make the case that it's probably the former, not the latter.

CUBAN: In the past, you had to memorize or retain knowledge because there was a cost to finding it. Did you have the encyclopedia? Could you spend time going to the library? Did you know somebody you could ask who knew the answer to this question? Were you going to be in a group that had a discussion about it? Now, what can't you find in 30 seconds or less? We live an open-book-test life that requires a completely different skill set.

TIME: Caitlin, you're a former teacher. What is all this going to mean?

FLANAGAN: You ask who's going to be left behind? Girls are going to be left behind. When we talk about people who play video games a lot, we're talking about boys. And 15 years from now, there's going to be lots of jobs in the new economy where we're going to be saying, Why are all these men getting these jobs? And, you're right, those are going to be the men who, as boys, played lots and lots of video games.

#### •IMMIGRATION

TIME: Let's move on to the subject of politics. Political professionals tell us that the next big issue to take the stage will be immigration. Do you think that's true, and if so, what kind of debate are we going to have?

MARTINEZ: I think the debate now is a bit disjointed. In Washington it's always about one piece of proposed legislation vs. another, and yet here, at the ground level in a city like Los Angeles, it's definitely the subject our readers feel most strongly about. If we editorialize on immigration, then the flow of letters is like 10 times that for any other subject. I think it taps into a lot of folks' anxieties about the changing world and globalization--a lot of things that really aren't about immigration. But I think it's a debate that's long overdue--we need to resolve this. There's no other issue I can think of that says more about our values as a society. We're relying on 8 million individuals in this country whom we have decided to keep, unlike past waves of immigration in this country, in an illegal status. And yet our economy needs these people, and we benefit from their labor. And then a lot of us want to pretend it's their fault and criminalize them. It's crazy.

TIME: So is the debate going to be ugly, inevitably?

MARTINEZ: I think the debate is already quite ugly in many corners, and I think that's what leads to the timidity in Washington. I mean, this is something that George Bush was talking about on 9/10, so to speak, and was one of his first priorities, and he keeps putting it on the back burner. And he had excuses initially, but his reticence to get back to it and really kind of force the issue really has to do with how ugly the debate could get, and has been.

JOHNSON: There's another way in which the immigration question kind of intersects with another major trend, which is the future of cities. In the early days of the Internet, there was this sense that cities were emptying out and the Internet was going to increase that because everybody was going to live in their ranch in Montana and telecommute and all this kind of stuff, and exactly the opposite has happened. And it's a global phenomenon. [Cities] are going to be increasingly central, maybe more important than they ever were. And the suburban trend of everyone kind of moving out there and sitting around watching television hasn't happened nearly as much as we thought it was going to.

TIME: Why is that?

JOHNSON: One of the reasons is connected to immigration. People tend to come over, and they have existing communities in these big cities, so they're kind of taking over large sections of them, which creates this amazing world culture. The other side of it is that people, for whatever reason, have begun to realize what makes cities so alluring and powerful and why so many interesting ideas come out of them, and they have started to

embrace that.

MARTINEZ: It feels very much like past waves of immigration, and yet the political discourse is a bit different. Samuel Huntington had his book that said that basically there was a fifth column of people trying to take back portions of Mexico that were lost. But the reality is different. There is assimilation. The 2000 Census showed that 71% of third-generation Mexican-American immigrants speak only English. And yet even mainstream media tend to make the mistake of equating Latino with Spanish speaking. One of our columnists, Gregory Rodriguez, likes to make the point that nobody would ever think of scolding Rudy Giuliani for not speaking fluent Italian, but everyone seems surprised that the Latino mayor of Los Angeles speaks broken Spanish, but they shouldn't be.

FLANAGAN: But what's going on that we're seeing the Latino community in Los Angeles move so quickly from poverty to middle class, often with no help from the government, when we see people stuck in intractable poverty who have been in America for generations?

CUBAN: America's being America.

FLANAGAN: What does that mean?

CUBAN: It's equal opportunity, but not equal experience or levels of success.

FLANAGAN: I think what people don't like is paying taxes. People living here in Los Angeles, no matter where they are in the political spectrum, they're saying, "Boy, we got a lot of people here who are succeeding and not paying taxes, and public schools are failing because they're filled with people who are here, and, yes, they work in our houses, so we are conflicted, so we're not really going to raise too much ire." But I think that it's a much more mercenary thing that people are angry about. I really think it's money and pocketbooks.

CUBAN: People feel threatened and insecure in their own lives. If you have uncertainty about where you may be a year from now, five years from now, 10 years from now, then you're going to question what's going on around you. We've become a free-agent economy, and as you get older, you recognize that if you become a free agent for whatever reason--layoffs, downsizing--it becomes much more difficult to deal with the realities of life, and that is scary to anybody. And so if you face that uncertainty and you start looking around, you start saying, "What adds to my uncertainty? Where can I have some influence? Where can I say something?" Like Andrés mentioned, there's easy scapegoating, but I don't think that's ever going to change, as long as we are free agents.

MARTINEZ: And I think the intensity of the immigration debate is ratcheted up by the cultural issue. Not to say that people are necessarily racist, but I think people have the notion that the mainstream, majority American, Anglo-European culture--whatever you want to call it--is eroding, and I think that makes a lot of people very anxious.

#### •FAMILY LIFE

TIME: A number of news stories lately suggest that the feminist revolution that shaped the lives of men and women in the '60s and '70s, even the '80s, has sort of run its course. Do you think that has happened?

JOHNSON: The trend that I find really interesting in all this is the education gap growing between men and women. I don't know exactly what the numbers are, but more girls than boys are graduating from college. So you're going to hit this point where you have this major gap in terms of educational background and thus employability between women and men--women being significantly ahead after all these years of making sure that women get access to the [whole] educational system. There's going to be a very interesting moment when we have to decide as a society, Why is this big gap happening? Is it because there's some innate difference between men and women that makes women more likely to gravitate toward school or thrive in school environments and not drop out, particularly when they're 18 or 22 or something like that? Or is it that at some level, society is discriminating against men as far as education is concerned? And what about [this possible] trend toward having women actually spend a little more time at home than we thought they were going to? We've got a lot of interesting demographic trends sort of coming together that are going to take a lot of thinking.

MARTINEZ: I'm very skeptical of the recent reporting that suggests any kind of pullback or U-turn [of women in the workforce]. I think the progress will continue in terms of greater equality in professional fields. I think, anytime you have progress, there are periods of sort of assimilating and digesting the things that have occurred. I think, when people look at traditional employment data, it doesn't sufficiently take into account nontraditional forms of employment that occur with both genders. That's why there's been a lot of debate about some of the unemployment statistics in recent years.

TIME: The suburban mom with her eBay business on the side.

MARTINEZ: Consulting, any number of opportunities. I think that as a society, economic necessity dictates that you're going to want to employ the most talented members of society. And I think you have a generation of women who have attained great success, and I don't see how you put that genie back in the bottle. And I think men too want partners in life who are getting fulfillment, not just from their home.

JOHNSON: The other thing is longevity. We're hitting a point where well-to-do women are hitting 85. A lot of women reasonably expect to live to 90. I'm not going to say how old she is [laughter], but my mom is at this age where the kids have all gone to college and her career is at full throttle, and she's quite reasonably expecting to have another decade when she's just at the top of her game.

CUBAN: As an entrepreneur, I only hope that I have to compete against companies that are sexist because they're gonna fail.

TIME: Where do you think this gender revolution is going?

FLANAGAN: What I write about, what I care most about is family life, and that's really understated in the difference between what we say we want and what we do. We really want this deep, meaningful time together in the haven of our homes. But when people actually get home, everybody races off. Mom's got something on the DVD, the daughter's on [Myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com) the son's got his video game, Dad's checking ESPN and his work e-mails, and everyone's compartmentalized within the household. I think there's deep yearning for--I know this makes me sound conservative, but I am--true community, and I think it's not good for families if we each do what we want to do. I think it's good for families if we have a sense of obligation and commitment to our family and maybe not to doing the things we each want to do but to being [instead] in service to one another.

MARTINEZ: What you just said about everyone running to do their own thing and what you said earlier, in the context of video games, about how our kids have become addicted to electronic gadgets and media--I think the same is true for adults. I think we're getting smarter, to go to your point, Steve, but I wonder if we're getting wiser.

FLANAGAN: Yes.

MARTINEZ: I realized the other day--I'm going to share this with the group--I'm taking longer showers. It dawned on me that I'm taking longer showers because that's the last bastion where I can think. A disproportionate amount of my thoughts now are in the shower, because it's the one place where I'm not hounded by my BlackBerry, my cell phone, the 24/7 news on TV.

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