



Mr. Big Trend

Futurist John Naisbitt on why small is not only beautiful, but powerful.

By Kevin Kelly

John Naisbitt hit the publishing jackpot in 1982 with his surprise bestseller *Megatrends*, about the future shape of the technological world. Naisbitt predicted that 10 shifts would dominate coming decades. One of his mantras, "High-Tech/ High-Touch," thoroughly entered the public consciousness and continues to be a rule of thumb: every technological force spawns a parallel but opposite anti-tech force. Mr. Big Trend followed *Megatrends* with consulting, speaking, and, in 1986, *Re-inventing the Corporation*, which he coauthored. Now he's back, with his latest shape-shifter, *Global Paradox: The Bigger the World Economy, the More Powerful Its Smallest Players*.

Wired: The subtitle of your new book, *The Bigger the World Economy, the More Powerful Its Smallest Players*, seems to summarize your message. What would you add to that?

John Naisbitt:

The subtitle is a formulation of how telecommunications is creating one single global economy, but at the same time empowering individuals and small groups by providing them opportunities that only big companies had before. For instance, my own company, Megatrends Ltd., comprises only four people, including me. But we are involved in 57 joint ventures in 42 countries. Many small players are global forces today. This could never be done before.

That echoes *Megatrends*, in which you pinpointed the movements "from centralization to decentralization," and "from either/or to multiple options." So, what's new?

It's being played out, and it's being accelerated, and it's being assimilated.

If an increasing number of smaller players are entering the global field, what about these billion-dollar media mergers that seem to be getting bigger and bigger?

Sometimes it's just dinosaurs mating. But sometimes it's necessary infrastructure. Again, it's not either/or. For example, you can't make 747s in your garage. Small is powerful - and small is getting more powerful - but appropriate scale is what is beautiful.

Do you think that there's going to be a different kind of bigness?

I hadn't thought of it quite that way, but yes, where we have bigness, it's going to be a different kind of bigness!

You predict that in 50 years there will be 1,000 countries in the world. What's your evidence?

In the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, 172 countries competed. More than 200 teams are expected in

1996. And in the magical year 2000 there'll probably be more than 300 countries represented. As the world becomes more universal, it also becomes more tribal. As people yield economic sovereignty and become economically interdependent, holding on to what distinguishes you from others becomes very important.

It sounds as if we are headed toward a patchwork world where people will have multiple allegiances. They'll have an allegiance to a tribal identity, an allegiance to an economic identity, an allegiance to a political boundary identity. These may be overlapping or contradictory.

If you're a Muslim in Bosnia, you are overwhelmingly a Muslim. But as the world opens up, you can be all kinds of things. You can be a Houstonian and a Texan and an American and an accountant and Chinese, all at the same time.

In this new environment, what is the basic unit? The individual? The family? The tribe?

Without question, in unthreatened environments, the individual is the basic unit. This is a triumph and a new celebration of the individual. Some things will be universal, partly because everybody's experiencing everybody else. And some things will differentiate this tribe from that tribe. The riddle of the 1990s is, what's going to become universal, and what's going to remain tribal?

Couldn't this great new epoch of individuality, rather than leading to world harmony, lead to global anarchy? There's a downside to mass democratization and individualization: you can get a big mob.

That's an elitist perception. I'm more Jeffersonian on this: If you can't trust the people, who can you trust?

So you are an optimist?

I've noticed there's at least a small market for being optimistic. [Chuckles.] There's going to be more optimism - as people get linked up all over the world and feel they're running their own lives. That will lead to more optimism.

You foresee a boom in global travel. People are mobile, borders are open. But if you combine this global mobility with increasing tribalism - and increasing awareness of injustice facilitated by global communications - then you have a wonderful recipe for global terrorism. Is this an unreasonable fear?

Oh, it's a reasonable fear. It's even worse than that. In the sense that a terrorist act is a statement, it must compete with more and more noise in the world. So like advertising, terrorism will have to be more and more outrageous.

Global Paradox contains a nice little summary of prospects for different regions in the near future: Europe falling into a deep recession, Japan's economy being flat, and North America experiencing modest to stronger growth. And you predicted booms in Asia and Latin America. What about Russia?

I think that Russia will eventually split up into as many as 40 or 50 countries; but in the meantime, it's a terrible mess. The only market that works in Russia is the black market. I think a perfectly respectable strategy would be to let the black market take over everything.

What does government look like 100 years from now? Does everybody vote for everything? Or are there good reasons to continue group representatives?

I think the next step beyond representative democracy is direct democracy. Why didn't we all get to vote on NAFTA? It impacted on all of our lives. Why didn't we all vote on the supercollider in Texas?

Well, I really want to believe that, but the problem is, I just don't have time to vote responsibly on everything. Anyway, who decides what things we vote for? That turns out to be the same problem: who frames the question?

The question is, are we going to find out? No one is stopping us from trying it.

Let's say God decided to punish you and appoint you the president of some country. What would you do?

I would nourish the entrepreneurs. We forget how easy it is to start a business in the US. You can start one overnight. Most countries are hostile to entrepreneurs.

You claim to be a student of the present. What would be your advice to a high school student?

It's an old-fashioned idea, but the most important thing to do is to learn how to learn. That's the great thing about journalism, which I trained in. We don't know a thing about something, but we know how to find out everything about it. In fact, that was Henry Luce's idea with Time magazine - to have great journalists who knew how to learn.

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