

*'To injure no man,  
but to bless all mankind'*

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Interview / **Jeremy Rifkin**

## Why 'end of ownership' carries a cost

By **Eric C. Evarts**

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**F**or consumers, the Information Age is about more than convenience – or even low prices. It's about turning them from consumers to mere users.

That's the message of Jeremy Rifkin, noted social critic and author of "Age of Access," (Putnam, 2000).

"We're not consumers anymore. We're clients" who buy short-term access to whatever we need, Mr. Rifkin said in an interview on a visit to Boston recently.

That development, not online shopping or the spread of cellular phones, is the crux of the change brought by the information revolution.

The role of consumers is evolving so dramatically because ownership is becoming outmoded, Rifkin says.

"Why would anyone want to own, when whatever you acquire is immediately either obsolescent or upgraded?" he asks.

One result: People today tend to focus on acquiring experiences, not things. "At dinner, they're not talking

about their acquisitions like my parents did," says Rifkin. "They're talking about what new experience they had." Travel, food, music, "isn't it all about experiences people share?"

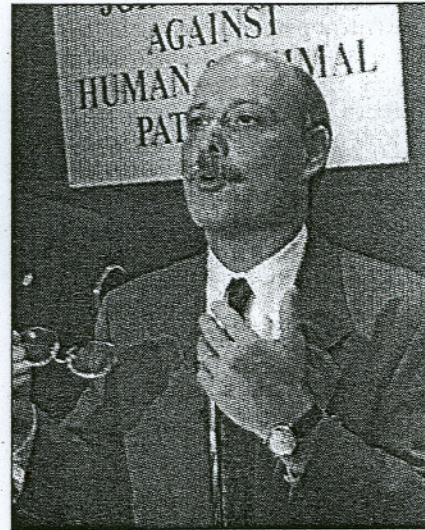
"Goods are metamorphosing into services," he says.

Two examples are car leasing and cellphone plans that include phones. The companies know you'll be back in two years to renew your relationship. And in the meantime, they collect huge sums of data about your life.

Rifkin is no fan of the age of access. While the trend may be unstoppable, he believes Americans need to reexamine where it's taking them and whether they want to take their own lives in a different direction. He cites a litany of concerns, from privacy to the question reflected in the subtitle of his book: "Why you spend more and own less."

By its very nature, the Information Age erodes personal privacy, he says. After she bought a car recently, Rifkin's wife got a call from the salesman wishing her a happy birthday, he says.

Companies call it "customer intimacy," or "client intimacy."



CHARLES TASNAD/VAP

**RIFKIN: Technology streamlines tasks, he says, but also means we're becoming too coldly 'efficient' in human relations.**

"And they actually mean it!," he says. "It's an oxymoron."

The most precious commodity in the age of access is people's time. And

companies want to buy your time "through memberships, retainers, subscriptions, and leases," he says.

People accept the annoyance because they are looking for "convenience against all the difficult decisions they have to make," he says.

People can also become dependent on these services, however, and forget how to do things for themselves, he warns.

And while technology saves us time on many trivial tasks, the tendency is to expect that time savings in other areas of our lives as well.

"Ask yourself: Would you ever treat someone you care for 'efficiently?'" he says.

"Everyone I know thinks they have less and less time with more and more technology" – even business leaders responsible for inventing new time-saving technologies, he says.

"When I ask: 'Do you think the quality of your life and your family is increasing in direct proportion to the technology you ... are introducing?' To a person, they all say, 'No, the quality of life

is deteriorating.' ”

And it's leaving most of the world behind, he says. “This divide between the connected and the disconnected actually is worse than the divide between the possessed and the dispossessed,” Rifkin says, “because here there's no communication between the two groups.”

He maintains that 62 percent of all the human beings on this earth have never made a telephone call and 40 percent have no electricity. But it's not technology that discriminates. And Rifkin says he doesn't reject the technology.

“Up to now this debate [on] the new technology has been about software, hardware,” Rifkin says. “And are you for progress or are you a Luddite? These are sophomoric debates. The issue is, how do we get a handle on what we want from this technology revolution? We need to ask the right questions: How much of our life is going to be commercial, utilitarian, expedient? And how much is intrinsic, spiritual? We need to master it — not let it master us.”

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