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Faking It: The Internet Revolution Has Nothing to Do With the Nasdaq

By MICHAEL LEWIS

When Internet stocks began their free fall in March 2000, the Internet was finally put in its proper place. It was nothing more than a fast delivery service for information -- that was what serious people who had either lost a lot of money in the late stages of the Internet boom or, more likely, failed to make money began to say now. The profit-making potential of the Internet had been overrated, and so the social effects of the Internet were presumed to be overrated. But they weren't. Speeding up information was not the only thing the Internet had done. The Internet had made it possible for people to thwart all sorts of rules and conventions. It wasn't just the commercial order that was in flux. Many forms of authority were secured by locks waiting to be picked. The technology and money-making potential of the Internet were far less interesting than the effects people were allowing it to have on their lives and what these, in turn, said about those lives.

What was happening on the Internet buttressed a school of thought in sociology known as role theory. The role theorists argue that we have no "self" as such. Our selves are merely the masks we wear in response to the social situations in which we find ourselves. The Internet had offered up a new set of social situations, to which people had responded by grabbing for a new set of masks. People take on the new tools they are ready for and make use of only what they need, how they need it. If they were using the Internet to experiment with their identities, it was probably because they found their old identities inadequate. If the Internet was giving the world a shove in a certain direction, it was probably because the world already felt inclined to move in that direction. The Internet was telling us what we wanted to become.

I have already written here about Jonathan Lebed, the 15-year-old boy in the New Jersey suburbs who used the Internet to transform himself into a stock market manipulator. Jonathan's story suggested that you couldn't really understand what was happening on the Internet unless you understood the conditions in the real world that led to what was happening on the Internet -- and you couldn't understand those unless you went there in person and looked around. Once you did that, you came to appreciate all sorts of new truths. For instance, the Internet was rock 'n' roll all over again. Not rock 'n' roll now, but rock 'n' roll in the 1950's and 1960's, when it actually terrified grown-ups. The Internet was enabling a great status upheaval and a subversion of all manner of social norms. And the people quickest to seize on its powers were the young.

A Finnish company, Nokia, figured this out before I

did. Nokia has come to dominate the mobile-phone business to the point where pretty much everyone now agrees that the Finns will be the first to connect mobile phones to the Internet in a way that the rest of us will find necessary. The Finns were successful because they were especially good at guessing what others would want from their mobile phones. One big reason for this -- or so the people at Nokia believe -- was that they spent a lot of time studying children. The kids came to each new technology fresh, without preconceptions, and they picked it up more quickly. They dreamed up uses for their phones that, for reasons no one fully understood, never occurred to grown-ups. The instant text message, for instance.

To create an instant message, you punched it by hand into your telephone, using the keypad as a typewriter. On the face of it, this is not an obvious use of a telephone keypad. The difference between the number of letters in the alphabet and the number of keys on the pad meant you wound up having to type a kind of Morse code. The technique had been popularized by Finnish schoolboys who were nervous about asking girls out on dates to their faces and Finnish schoolgirls who wanted to tell one another what had happened on those dates as soon as it happened. They had proved that if the need to communicate indirectly is sufficiently urgent, words can be typed into a telephone keypad with amazing speed. Five and a half million Finns sent one another more than a billion instant messages in the year 2000.

The instant message has fast become a staple of European corporate communication. The technique spread from Finnish children to businessmen

because the kids taught their parents. Nokia employed anthropologists to tell them this. Finland has become the first nation on earth to acknowledge formally the childcentric model of economic development: if you wanted a fast-growing economy, you needed to promote rapid technical change, and if you intended to promote rapid technical change, you needed to cede to children a strange measure of authority.

When capitalism encourages ever more rapid change, children enjoy one big advantage over adults: they haven't decided who they are. They haven't sunk a lot of psychological capital into a particular self. When a technology comes along that rewards people who are willing to chuck overboard their old selves for new ones, the people who aren't much invested in their old selves have an edge. The things that get tossed overboard with a 12-year-old self don't seem like much to give up at the time.

I spent my childhood in New Orleans. I would like now to consider this otherwise uninteresting fact, as it is bound up with my interest in identity and change. New Orleans has always been an excellent place to observe progress. To know progress, you need to know what it has rolled over or left behind, and when progress is moving as fast as it is now, recalling its victims is difficult. New Orleans keeps its anachronisms alive long enough for them to throw the outside world into sharp relief. For instance, until the mid-1990's you could find actual gentlemen lawyers in New Orleans, who thought of themselves mainly as members of an honorable and dignified profession. One of these dinosaurs was my father.

Right up until it collapsed, the old family law firm that my father managed clung to its charming habits. The gentlemen lawyers wrote notes to one another arguing over the correct pronunciation of certain phrases in ancient Greek. They collected strange artifacts from dead cultures. They treated education as a branch of religion. They wore bow ties. They were terrifyingly at ease with themselves but did not know the meaning of casual Friday. Their lives had been premised on a frankly elitist idea: an attorney was above the fray. He possessed special knowledge. He observed a strict code of conduct without ever having to say what it was. He viewed all entreaties to change with suspicion. The most important thing in the world to him was his stature in the community, and yet so far as anyone else could determine, he never devoted an ounce of his mental energy to worrying about it. Status wasn't a cause; it was an effect of the way he led his life.

The first hint I had that this was no longer a tenable pose -- and would not be a tenable pose for me -- came from a man I had never met called Morris Bart. I was some kind of teenager at the time. My father and I were driving along the Interstate highway that ran through town when we came upon a giant billboard. It said something like: "Are you a victim? Have you been injured? No one represents your interests? Call Morris Bart, attorney-at-law." And there was a big picture of Morris Bart. He had the easy smile of a used-car dealer.

"Do you do the same thing as Morris Bart?" I asked my father.

"Not exactly."

"But his billboard says he's a lawyer."

"We have a different kind of law firm."

"How?"

"We don't have billboards."

"Why not?"

"It's just not something a lawyer does."

That was true. It was true right up to the moment Morris Bart stuck up his picture beside the Interstate. My father and his colleagues remained unmoved, but the practice of law was succumbing to a general force, the twin American instincts to democratize and to commercialize. (Often they amount to the same thing.) These are the two forces that power the Internet and in turn are powered by it.

Morris Bart was a tiny widget inside the same magnificent American instrument of destruction that the Internet has so eloquently upgraded. A few years after Bart put up his billboard, the lawyers in my father's firm began to receive calls from "consultants" who wanted to help teach them how to steal clients and lawyers from other firms -- a notion that would have been unthinkable a few years earlier and remained unthinkable to some. A few years after that, the clients insisted that lawyers bill by the hour -- and then questioned the bills! The old game was over. The minute the market intruded

too explicitly, the old prestige began to seep out of the law. For the gentlemen lawyers, it ended about as well as it could. But still it ended. And for people whose identity was wrapped up in the idea, the end gave their story the shape of tragedy.

I recall the feeling when it first dawned on me that the ground beneath my teenage feet was moving. I did not enjoy the premonition of doom in my father's world. But what troubled me even more was that some part of me wanted my father to have his own billboard beside the highway -- which of course he would never do. My response was to leave home and invent another self for myself. Had the Internet been available, I might have simply gone online.

That's what Jonathan Lebed did. And that's what another teenager with an AOL account named Marcus Arnold began doing last summer -- putting on a mask that would cause even Morris Bart to shudder and delivering another insult to the social order and its reigning notions of status and expertise.

The Askme Corporation was created in 1999 by former Microsoft employees. The software it sold enabled the big companies that bought it -- 3M, Procter & Gamble -- to create a private Web for their workers. This private Web was known as "knowledge sharing." The knowledge exchange was a screen on a computer where employees could put questions to the entire company. The appeal of this was obvious. Once an AskMe-style knowledge exchange was up and running, it didn't matter where inside the company any particular expertise resided. So long as expertise didn't leave the company, it

was always on tap for whoever needed it.

AskMe soon found that it was able to tell a lot about a company from its approach to the new software. In pyramid-shaped hierarchical organizations, the bosses tended to appoint themselves or a few select subordinates as the "experts." Questions rose from the bottom of the organization, the answers flowed down from the top and the original hierarchy was preserved, even reinforced. In less-hierarchical pancake-shaped companies, the bosses used the software to create a network of all the company's employees and to tap intelligence wherever in that network it happened to be. That way, anyone in the company could answer anyone else's questions. Anyone could be the expert. Of course, it didn't exactly inspire awe in the ranks to see the intern answering a question posed by the vice president for strategic planning. But many companies decided that a bit of flattening was a small price to pay to tap into the collective knowledge bank.

The people who created the AskMe software believed that it gave companies whose bosses were willing to risk their own prestige and authority an advantage over the hierarchical companies whose bosses were not. They didn't say this publicly, because they wanted to sell their software to the pyramid-shaped organizations too. But they knew that once the software was deployed, companies that flattened their organization charts to encourage knowledge to flow freely in every direction would beat companies that didn't. Knowledge came from the strangest places; employees knew a lot more than they thought they did; and the gains in the collective wisdom outweighed any losses to the boss's authority.

In short, the software subtly changed the economic environment. It bestowed new rewards on the egalitarian spirit. It made life harder for pyramids and easier for pancakes.

Out in the field, AskMe's salespeople, like salespeople everywhere, found themselves running into the same five or six objections from potential buyers -- even when the buyers were pancake-shaped. One was "How do you know that your software won't break down when all of our 200,000 employees are using it heavily?" To prove that it wouldn't, AskMe created a Web site and offered a version of its software to the wider public. The site, called AskMe.com, went up on the Web in February 2000 and quickly became the most heavily used of a dozen or so knowledge exchanges on the Internet. In its first year, the site had more than 10 million visitors.

This was striking in view of how peripheral the site was to the ambitions of the AskMe Corporation. The company made no money from the site and did not bother to monitor what went on there or even to advertise its existence. The millions of people using the site were drawn by word of mouth. The advice on the site was freely offered. The experts were self-appointed and ranked by the people who sought the advice. Experts with high rankings received small cash prizes from AskMe.com. The prizes -- and the free publicity -- attracted a lot of people who don't normally work for nothing. Accountants, lawyers and financial consultants mingled their licensed knowledge with experts in sports trivia, fortune telling and body piercing.

AskMe Corporation didn't think of it this way, but its public Web site suggested a number of questions. What is the wider society's instinctive attitude toward knowledge? Are we willing to look for it wherever it might be found or only from the people who are supposed to possess it? Does the world want to be a pyramid or a pancake?

In the summer of 2000, in a desert town called Perris, halfway between Los Angeles and Palm Springs, 15-year-old Marcus Arnold offered his reply to those questions, and a thousand or so more besides. Marcus's parents had immigrated to Perris from Belize by way of South Central Los Angeles. Why anyone would move to Perris from anywhere was not immediately clear. Perris was one of those nonplaces that America specializes in creating. One day, it was a flat, hazy stretch of sand and white rock beneath an endless blue sky into which recreational skydivers routinely plunged; the next, some developer had laid out a tract of 10,000 identical homes; and the day after that, it was teeming with people who were there mainly because it was not someplace else. The decision of human beings to make a home of it had little effect on the identity of Perris. Even after the tract houses had been deposited in the desert, Perris was known chiefly as a place to leap onto from an airplane.

Marcus lived with his parents and his twin brother in a small brick house a mile or so from the big drop zone. Over the family's two-car garage, from morning until night, people stepped out of planes and plummeted to earth, and the blue sky above Marcus was permanently scarred by parachutes. Marcus himself was firmly earthbound, a great big bear of a boy. He was six feet tall and weighed

maybe 200 pounds. He did not walk but lumbered from the computer to the front door, then back again. The computer squatted on a faux-antique desk in the alcove between the dining room and the living room, which were as immaculately kept as showrooms in a model home. It was the only computer in the house. In theory, the family shared it; in practice, it belonged to him. He now needed as much time on it as he could get, as he was a leading expert on AskMe.com. His field was the law.

When I first visited Marcus, the blue screen displayed the beginning of an answer to a question on AskMe.com that he had bashed out before I arrived:

Your son should not be in jail or on trial. According to Miranda versus Arizona the person to be arrested must be read his rights before he was asked any questions. If your son was asked any questions before the reading of his rights he should not be in prison. If you want me to help you further write me back on this board privately.

The keyboard vanished beneath Marcus's jumbo hands, and another page on AskMe.com popped up on the screen. Marcus wanted to show me the appallingly weak answer to a question that had been offered by one of the real lawyers on the site. "I can always spot a crummy attorney," he said. "There are people on the Web site who have no clue what they're talking about -- they are just there to get rankings and to sell their services and to get paid." Down went his paws, out of sight went the keyboard and up popped one of Marcus's favorite Web sites. This one listed the menus on death row in Texas. Photographs of men put to death by the

state appeared next to hideous lists of the junk food they had ordered for their last meals. Marcus browsed these for a minute or two, searching for news, then moved on, without comment.

One privilege of adolescence is that you can treat everything around you as normal, because you have nothing to compare it with, and Marcus appeared to be taking full advantage of it. To Marcus, it was normal that you could punch a few buttons into a machine and read what a man who was executed by the state this morning had eaten last night. It was normal that the only signs of life outside his house were the people floating down from the sky and into the field out back. It was normal that his parents had named his identical twin brother Marc. Marc and Marcus. And it was normal that he now spent most of the time he was not in school on the Internet, giving legal advice to grown-ups.

Marcus had stumbled upon AskMe.com late in the spring of 2000. He was studying for his biology exam and looking for an answer to a question. He noticed that someone had asked a question about the law to which he knew the answer. Then another. A thought occurred: why not answer them himself? To become an official expert, he only needed to fill in a form. He did this on June 5, 2000 -- a day already enshrined in Marcus's mind. "I always wanted to be an attorney since I was, like, 12," he said, "but I couldn't do it because everyone is going to be: 'Like, what? Some 12-year-old kid is going to give me legal advice?'"

"They'd feel happier with a 15-year-old?"

He drew a deep breath and made a face that indicated that he took this to be a complicated question. "So when I first went on AskMe," he said, "I told everybody I was 20, roughly about 20, and everyone believed me." Actually, he claimed to be 25, which to a boy of 15 is, I suppose, roughly 20. To further that impression, he adopted the handle LawGuy1975. People who clicked onto his page found him described as "LawGuy1975 aka Billy Sheridan." Billy Sheridan was Marcus's handle on America Online.

A few days after he appointed himself a legal expert, Marcus recounted, he was logging onto the Internet solely to go to AskMe.com and deal with grown-ups' legal problems.

What sort of legal problems? I asked him.

"Simple ones," he said. "Some of them are like, 'My husband is in jail for murder, and he didn't do it, and I need to file a motion for dismissal, how do I do it?' I have received questions from people who are just, like, you know, 'I am going to be put in jail all of a sudden, can somebody help me plead before they come cart me off?' And it's just, like, well, come on, that's a cry for help. You're not just going to sit there. But most of them are simple questions. 'What's a felony?' Or 'How many years will I get if I commit this crime?' Or 'What happens if I get sued?' Simple questions." He said all this in the self-conscious rapid-fire patter of a television lawyer.

Once he became an expert, Marcus's career took on a life of its own. The AskMe rankings were driven by the number of questions the expert answered, the

speed of his replies and the quality of those replies, as judged by the recipients, who bestowed on them a rating of one to five stars. By July 1, Marcus was ranked No. 10 out of 150 or so experts in AskMe.com's criminal-law division, many of whom were actual lawyers. As he tells it, that's when he decided to go for the gold. "When I hit the Top 10, I got some people who were like, 'Congratulations, blah blah blah.' So my adrenaline was pumping to answer more questions. I was just, like: You know what? Let me show these people I know what I'm doing." He needed to inspire even more people to ask him questions, and to reply to them quickly, and in a way that prompted them to reward him with lots of stars. To that end, he updated the page that advertised his services. When he was done it said:

I am a law expert with two years of formal training in the law. I will help anyone I can! I have been involved in trials, legal studies and certain forms of jurisprudence. i am not accredited by the state bar association yet to practice law. . . . sincerely, Justin Anthony Wyrick Jr.

"Justin was the name I always wanted -- besides mine," Marcus said. Justin Anthony Wyrick Jr. -- a pseudonym on top of a pseudonym on top of a pseudonym. Justin Anthony Wyrick Jr. had a more authoritative ring to it, in Marcus's opinion, and in a lot of other people's too. On one day, Marcus received and answered 110 questions. Maybe a third of them came from the idly curious, a third from people who were already in some kind of legal trouble and the final third from people who appeared to be engaged in some sort of odd cost-benefit analysis.

q: What amount of money must a person steal or gain through fraud before it is considered a felony in Illinois?

a: In Illinois you must have gained \$5,001+ in an illegal fashion in order to constitute fraud. If you need anything else please write back! Sincerely, Justin Anthony Wyrick Jr.

q: Can a parole officer prevent a parolee from marrying?

a: Hey! Unless the parolee has "no marriage" under the special conditions in which he is released, he can marry. If you have any questions, please write back. Sincerely, Justin Anthony Wyrick Jr.

The more questions Marcus answered, the more people who logged onto the boards looking for legal advice wanted to speak only to him. In one two-week stretch he received 943 legal questions and answered 939. When I asked him why he hadn't answered the other four, a look of profound exasperation crossed his broad face. "Traffic law," he said. "I'm sorry. I don't know traffic law." By mid-July, he was the No. 3 rated expert in criminal law on AskMe.com. Beneath him in the rankings were 125 licensed attorneys and a wild assortment of ex-cops and ex-cons. The next-youngest person on the board was 31.

In a few weeks, Marcus had created a new identity for himself: legal wizard. He now viewed school not so much as preparation for a future legal career as material for an active one. He investigated a boondoggle taken by the local school board and

discovered that it had passed off on the taxpayer what to him appeared to be the expenses for a private party. He brought that, and a lot more, up at a public hearing. Why grown-up people with grown-up legal problems took him seriously was the great mystery Marcus didn't much dwell on -- except to admit that it had nothing to do with his legal training. He had had no legal training, formal or informal.

On the top of the Arnold family desk was a thin dictionary, plus stacks and stacks of court cases that people from AskMe who had come to rely on Marcus's advice had mimeographed and sent to him for his review. (The clients sent him the paperwork, and he wrote motions, which the clients then passed on to licensed attorneys for submission to a court.) But there was nothing on the desk or in the house even faintly resembling a book about the law. The only potential sources of legal information were the family computer and the big-screen TV.

"Where do you find books about the law?" I asked.

"I don't," he said, tap-tap-tapping away on his keyboard. "Books are boring. I don't like reading."

So you go on legal Web sites?"

"No."

"Well, when you got one of these questions did you research your answer?"

"No, never. I just know it."

"You just know it."

"Exactly."

The distinct whiff of an alternate reality lingered in the air. It was just then that Marcus's mother, Priscilla, came through the front door. She was a big lady, teetering and grunting beneath jumbo-size sacks of groceries. A long box of doughnuts jutted out of the top of one.

"Hi, Marcus, what you doing?" she said, gasping for breath.

"Just answering some questions," he said.

"What were you answering?" she asked with pleasure. She radiated pride.

"I got one about an appellate bond -- how to get one," he said. "Another one about the Supreme Court. A petition to dismiss something."

"We got some chili-cheese dogs here."

"That's cool."

Priscilla nipped into the kitchen, where she heaped the doughnuts onto a plate and tossed the dogs into boiling water. Strange new smells wafted out over the computer.

"Where did you acquire your expertise?" I asked.

"Marcus was born with it!" Priscilla shouted. Having no idea how to respond, I ignored her.

"What do you mean?" Marcus asked me. He was genuinely puzzled by my question.

"Where does your information come from?"

"I don't know," he said. "Like, I really just don't know."

"How can you not know where knowledge comes from?" I asked.

"After, like, watching so many TV shows about the law," he said, "it's just like you know everything you need to know." He gave a little mock shiver. "It's scary. I just know these things."

Again Priscilla shouted from the kitchen, "Marcus has got a gift!"

Marcus leaned back in his chair -- every inch the young prodigy -- pleased that his mother was saving him the trouble of explaining the obvious to a fool. It was possible to discern certain lines in Marcus's character, but the general picture was still out of focus. He had various personas: legal genius, humble Internet helpmate, honest broker, ordinary kid who liked the Web. Now he cut a figure familiar to anyone who has sat near a front row in school -- the fidgety, sweet-natured know-it-all.

What he knew, exactly, was unclear. On the Web,

he had come across to many as a font of legal expertise. In the flesh, he gave a more eclectic performance -- which was no doubt one reason he found the Internet as appealing as he did. Like Jonathan Lebed, he was the kind of person high school is designed to suppress, and like Jonathan Lebed, he had refused to accept his assigned status. When the real world failed to diagnose his talents, he went looking for a second opinion. The Internet offered him as many opinions as he needed to find one he liked. It created the opportunity for new sorts of self-perceptions, which then took on a reality all their own.

There was something else familiar about the game Marcus was playing, but it took me a while to put my finger on it. He was using the Internet the way adults often use their pasts. The passage of time allows older people to remember who they were as they would like to have been. Young people do not enjoy access to that particular escape route from their selves -- their pasts are still unpleasantly present -- and so they tend to turn the other way and imagine themselves into some future adult world. The sentiment that powers their fantasies goes by different names -- hope, ambition, idealism -- but at bottom it is nostalgia. Nostalgia for the future. These days nostalgia for the future is a lot more fashionable than the traditional kind. And the Internet has made it possible to act on the fantasy in whole new ways.

Priscilla shouted from the kitchen: "Marcus had his gift in the womb. I could feel it."

Now Marcus had his big grin on. "Welcome to my brain," he said.

"What?"

"Welcome to my brain."

He had said it so much like a genial host offering his guest the comfortable chair that I had to stop myself from saying "Thanks." Behind him was a long picture window overlooking the California desert -- the view was the reason Priscilla loved her house. Beyond that, brown mountains. In the middle distance between white desert and brown mountain, a parachute ripped open and a body jerked skyward.

"Let's try this again," I said.

"O.K.," he said, cheerfully.

"Basically, you picked up what you know from watching 'Court TV' shows," I said.

"Basically," he said.

"And from these Web sites that you browse."

"Basically."

Priscilla shouted out from the kitchen, "How many dogs you want, Marcus?"

"Two, and some doughnuts," Marcus hollered.

"What do you think these people would have done

if you weren't there to answer their questions?" I asked.

"They would have paid an attorney," he said. But as he said it, his big grin vanished and a cloud shadowed his broad, open face. All of a sudden he was the soul of prudence.

He may well have been recalling the P.R. fiasco that followed the discovery by a hundred or so licensed attorneys on AskMe.com of the true identity of the new expert moving up their ranks. In any case, he lifted his giant palms toward me in the manner of the Virgin Mary resisting the entreaties of the Holy Spirit and said: "Look, I'm not out there to take business away from other people. That's not my job."

"But you think that legal expertise is overrated?"

"Completely."

Once Marcus attained his high AskMe.com rankings, a lot of people he didn't really know began to ask for his phone number and his fee structure. For the first time, for some reason he was unable to explain fully, his conscience began to trouble him. He decided it was time to come clean with his age. To do this, he changed his expert profile. Where it had read "legal expert," it now read "15-year-old intern attorney expert."

A few hours after he posted his confession, hostile messages came hurtling toward him. A few of them came from his "clients," but most came from the lawyers and others who competed with him for

rankings and publicity. A small war broke out on the message boards, with Marcus accusing the lawyers of ganging up on him to undermine his No. 3 ranking and the lawyers accusing Marcus of not knowing what he was talking about. The lawyers began to pull up Marcus's old answers and bestow on them lowly one-star ratings -- thus dragging down his average. Then they did something even worse: they asked him detailed questions about the finer points of the law. When he couldn't supply similarly detailed answers, they laid into him.

Marcus's replies to the e-mail lashings read less like the work of a defense lawyer than like those of a man trying to talk his torturers into untying him:

"I am reporting your abusive response, for it hurts my reputation, and my dignity as an expert on this board."

"Please don't e-mail me threats."

"Leave me alone! I am not even practicing law!"

"Please, I beg of you, stop sending me letters saying that you'll be watching me, because you are scaring my parents."

"I really just want to be friends."

"Let's try to be friends, or something?"

To which Marcus's wittiest assailant replied: "In your last two posts you've ended by asking that I be your friend. That's like the mortally wounded

gladiator wanting to be friends with the lion."

On the one hand, the whole episode was absurd -- Marcus Arnold was a threat to no one but himself and, perhaps, the people who sought his advice. To practice law, you still needed a license, and no 15-year-old boy was going to be granted one. At the same time, Marcus had wandered into an arena alive with combustible particles. The Internet had arrived at an embarrassing moment for the law.

The knowledge gap between lawyers and nonlawyers had been shrinking for some time, and the Internet was closing it further. Legal advice was being supplied over the Internet, often free -- and it wasn't just lawyers doing the supplying. Students, cops, dicks, even ex-cons went onto message boards to help people with their questions and cases. At the bottom of this phenomenon was a corrosively democratic attitude toward legal knowledge, which the legal profession now simply took for granted. "If you think about the law," the co-chairman of the American Bar Association task force on "e-lawyering," Richard S. Granat, said in an interview in *The New York Times*, in an attempt to explain the boom in do-it-yourself Internet legal services, "a large component is just information. Information by itself can go a long way to help solve legal problems."

In that simple sentence you could hear whatever was left of the old professional mystique evaporating. The status of lawyering was in flux, had been for some time. An anthology that will cause elitists to weep will one day be culled from the long shelf of diatribes about the descent into mass culture of the American lawyer at the end of

the 20th century. Separate chapters will detail the advent of the billable hour, the 1977 Supreme Court decision permitting lawyers to advertise their services and a magazine called *The American Lawyer*, which in 1985 began to publish estimates of lawyers' incomes. Once the law became a business, it was on its way to becoming a commodity. Reduce the law to the sum of its information, and, by implication, anyone can supply it.

That idea had already traveled a long way, and the Internet was helping it to travel faster. After all, what did it say about the law that even a 15-year-old boy who had never read a law book could pass as an expert in it to a huge audience? It said that a lot of people felt that legal knowledge was accessible to the amateur. Who knows? Maybe they were right. Perhaps legal expertise was overrated. Completely.

By its nature, the Internet undermined anyone whose status depended on a privileged access to information. But you couldn't fairly blame the Internet for Marcus Arnold, any more than you could blame the Internet for Jonathan Lebed. The Internet was merely using Marcus to tell us something about ourselves: we doubted the value of formal training. A little knowledge had always been a dangerous thing. Now it was becoming a respectable thing. A general collapse in the importance of formal training was a symptom of post-Internet life; knowledge, like the clothing that went with it, was being informalized. Casual thought went well with casual dress.

And so the situation in which Marcus Arnold found himself in the late summer of 2000,

while bizarre, was revealing. Marcus had been publicly humiliated by the real lawyers, but it didn't stop him from offering more advice. He clung by his big mitts to a lower ranking. Then the clients began to speak. With pretty much one voice they said, "Leave the kid alone!" A lot of people seemed to believe that any 15-year-old who had risen so high in the ranks of AskMe.com legal experts must be some kind of wizard. They began to seek him out more than ever before; they wanted his, and only his, advice.

Marcus wiped himself off and gave it to them. In days his confidence was fully restored. "You always have your critics," he said. "I mean, with the real lawyers, it's a pride issue. They can't let someone who could be their son beat them. Plus they have a lot more time than I do. I'm always stretched for time. Six hours a day of school, four hours of homework, sometimes I can't get online to answer the questions until after dinner."

Despite this and other handicaps, Marcus's ranking rebounded. Two weeks after he disclosed his age, he was on the rise; two weeks later he hit No. 1. The legal advice he gave to a thousand or so people along the way might not have withstood the scrutiny of the finest legal minds. Some of it was the sort of stuff you could glean directly from Judge Judy; more of it was a simple restating of the obvious in a friendly tone. Marcus didn't have much truck with the details; he didn't handle complexity terribly well. But that was the whole point of him -- he didn't need to. A lot of what a real lawyer did was hand out simple information in a way that made the client feel served, and this Marcus did well. He may have had only the vaguest idea of what he was

talking about and a bizarre way of putting what he did know. But out there in the void, they loved him.

Marcus's father, Melvin, worked at a furniture retail outlet two hours' drive from home and so wasn't usually around when his son was handing out advice on the Internet. Not that it mattered; he wouldn't have known what Marcus was up to in any case. "I'm not the sort of person who gets on the computer," Melvin said when he arrived home and saw Marcus bashing away for my benefit. "I never get on the computer, as a matter of fact." And he said this matter-of-factly, in a spirit in no way defiant or angry, just gently resigned to the Way Things Are. "When I need something from the computer," he also said, "I ask Marcus."

"It just gives me more computer time," Marcus said and resumed his furious typing.

What with the computer smack in the center of the place, the Arnolds' house didn't allow me to talk to Melvin without disrupting Marcus. When Marcus realized that he was about to be forced to listen to whatever his father might have to say about his Internet self, he lost interest. He called for Marc, and the twin bear-boys lumbered out the front door. On the way out, he turned and asked me if I knew anyone in Hollywood he might talk to. "I think what I really want to do," he said, "is be an actor." With that final non sequitur, he left me to cross-examine his parents.

The first thing that was instantly clear was that, unlike their son, they were aware that their lives were no longer what anyone would call normal. The Lebeds had proved that if your adolescent child was

online, you didn't need to leave your house to feel uprooted. The Arnolds were already uprooted, so they didn't prove anything. They had moved from Belize to South Central Los Angeles. They had moved from there to Perris for a reason, which Melvin now calmly explained to me. At the family's Los Angeles home, Marcus's older brother had been murdered. He had been shot dead in cold blood by an acquaintance in the middle of a family barbecue. The man who shot him was up for parole in 2013. "Marcus didn't tell you about that, did he?" Melvin asked rhetorically. "In my opinion, that's how Marcus got interested in the law. He saw that it wasn't fair."

The Arnolds moved to Perris shortly after their son's murder. Not long after they arrived, Marcus asked for a computer. He had waited until he crashed the Top 10 on AskMe.com before he let his parents know why, suddenly, he was up at all hours bashing away on the family keyboard. His parents had had radically different reactions to the news. His mother nearly burst with pride -- she always knew that Marcus was special, and the Internet was giving him a chance to prove it. His father was mildly skeptical. He couldn't understand how a 15-year-old boy could be functioning as a lawyer. The truth is, Melvin hadn't taken Marcus all that seriously, at least not at first. He assumed that he was reacting to the grief of his older brother's murder. Then the phone started to ring . . . and ring. "These were grown-up people," Melvin said, still incredulous at the events taking place under his roof. "They call this house and ask for Marcus. These people are like 40, 45 years old, and they're talking to Marcus about their legal problems, but they're not including the parents. That's where I get scared, because it's not supposed to work like that."

"Well . . . ," Priscilla said. She scrunched up her big friendly face in what was clearly intended to be disapproval. "They're not acknowledging the fact that he's 15. They're acknowledging the fact that he can give them some legal advice."

"But the phone," Melvin said. "It is always ringing. These people want Marcus to give them legal advice. I mean, really, it's like what he does people do as a job. And he's doing it right here. I get so frustrated. I always say, 'Marcus, you're talking too much, you're talking too much.'"

"But that's what attorneys do," Priscilla said. "They talk a lot."

Melvin gave up on his wife and turned to me. "I tell him to stay off the phone, stay off the computer. This is the thing I keep on saying to him. Nobody else in this house can ever use the phone. There's no way I can stop him, but still--."

"But attorneys talk -- that's what they do," Priscilla said.

"I don't use the phone anyway, really," Melvin said. "The calls come, they're never mine, you know. It's always Marcus, Marcus, Marcus -- people calling him from everywhere."

They were off and running on what was clearly a familiar conversational steeplechase. "I don't understand," I said. "How do all these people have your phone number?" But neither of them was

listening. Priscilla, having seized on her main point, was now intent on spearing Melvin on the end of it. "But that's what he's got to do," she said. "That's what attorneys do! Talk!"

"Yeah, but he's not an attorney," Melvin said. He turned to me again in a bid for arbitration. "He drives you nuts with his talk. Nuts!"

"How do they get your phone number?" I asked again.

"But he will be one day," Priscilla said. "He has that gift."

"He's a kid," Melvin said.

"How did they get your phone number?" I asked for the third time.

Priscilla looked up. "Marcus puts it on the Internet," she said. To her, it was the most normal of things.

Melvin took a different view. Maybe it was the distinct feeling he had that a lot of Marcus's "clients" had had to stand in line at a pay phone to make their calls. Or that they always seemed to prefer to wait on hold rather than call back later. Or their frantic tones of voice. Whatever the reason, he didn't like it. "I told Marcus," he said wearily, "that we don't even know who these people are -- they might be criminals out there -- that you're not supposed to give them our phone number, our address."

Priscilla furrowed her brow and tried to conjure concern. "What really scared me one time," she said, less with fear than in the spirit of cooperation, "was this lady that he was assisting with her criminal case. The lady sent him the whole book of her court case. I said: 'Marcus, why would you want to take this upon yourself? You've got to tell this lady you're just 15 years old.' But he didn't listen to me. The point came that the lady actually wanted him to go to court with her, and I said, 'No, we've got to stop it here, because you don't have a license for that, you don't study law.' He said: 'Mom, you've got to drive me to the court. I know what I'm doing.' I said: 'No way. You don't have a license to dictate the law.'"

I could see that her heart wasn't in this soliloquy. She stopped and brightened, as if to say she had done her best to meet her husband halfway, then said, "But I think all of this Internet is good for Marcus."

"Do you think Marcus knows what he's doing?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, very much," she said. "Because there's a lot of times that we would watch these court shows, and he would come up with the same suggestions and the same answers like the attorneys would do."

That appeared to settle the matter; even Melvin could not disagree. Marcus knew his "Court TV."

"Can you see him charging for this advice?" I asked.

"At what age?" Melvin said. A new alarm entered his voice.

"Thirty."

"I hope," Melvin said with extreme caution, "I hope he will do well."

"He's supposed to have his own law firm by then," Priscilla said.

Michael Lewis is a contributing writer for the magazine. This article is adapted from his new book, "Next," which will be published later this month by W.W. Norton.

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