RELEASE

Some have called Esther Dyson the most powerful woman in computing. But is her fascination with Eastern Europe leading to eclipse on her home turf?

It's mid-July, and in the past month computer-industry analyst Esther Dyson has been to Munich, Prague, Bucharest, and London. She's come halfway around the world, to California, for the regular meeting of the Mayfield Software Partners venture capital firm, where she is a limited partner. And while she's in the neighborhood, she'll do some research for an upcoming issue of Release 1.0, her newsletter, on the topic of performance support.

First stop for the day is Intel, where she talks with a woman who is implementing a hypertext-like database that Intel salespeople can carry on their laptops. Next stop is Silicon Graphics (SGI) for the Indy workstation announcement. Of course, Esther is recognized and cooed over by everyone.

People want to talk to Esther – because she is Esther. In the world she travels in, she is one of those women, like Martina in tennis or Hillary in politics, who need only be identified by her first name. In fact, Esther may well be the most powerful woman in computing.

But how did she get there? "Esther is delirious with ideas," says venture capitalist Ruth Ann Quindlen. In an industry that feeds on avant-garde technology, Esther is a master of assimilating new ideas and retelling them to those who can turn them into wealth. In June 1990, for example, Esther devoted an issue of Release 1.0 to the concept of the HandyWidget, her term for the handheld all-purpose personal data assistants (PDAs) that are just now hitting the market.

What Esther gets interested in will matter in the industry; she has a kind of distant early warning system that 1,500 of the most influential people in the computer industry (aka, her subscribers) look to when they design new products, create new markets, and try to change the world. For them, Esther is a one-woman think tank.

"Esther is one of the very few people in the industry of true creativity and genuine enthusiasm," says Lotus senior vice president KC Branscomb. "She's like Shakespeare's Puck, magically appearing at the right moment."

As complex and contradictory as any high achiever, Esther has intrigued the computer industry for more than a decade. Silicon Valley's answer to a Hollywood agent, Esther's power is in connecting people with ideas, and like a powerful Hollywood agent, it's difficult to find anyone with critical distance who is willing to speak on the record – because she is Esther. Some of the naysayers's silence comes from a genuine respect. They simply don't want to hurt The Intellectual of computer analysts. With the rest, it depends on how well-placed they are. If they are big cheeses, the not-wanting-to-offend is an acceptance of the computer industry as a very small town where everyone has to play and work together. With the small cheeses, it's the fear that earning Esther's dislike would mean restricted access to the connections-broker par excellence whose introductions can make or save companies. Worse, she might ignore them. But people with nice things to say will line up to heap praises on her.

After SGI's Indy press conference, Esther talks with the man who manages SGI in Europe, as Eastern Europe is her current obsession. Both agree that IBM has too often been associated with old, discredited regimes, and that Hewlett-Packard often does a good job abroad. Leaving SGI, she wistfully notices the T-shirts worn by the celebrating developers in commemoration of the Indy launch. Esther is famous for sporting industry give-away T-shirts, but this time they weren't offered to non-SGI employees.

Esther has been driven to her meetings all day, because, among her many contradictions, Esther the transnational doesn't drive. No matter – people gladly chauffeur her around freeway-centric Silicon Valley, because she is

Esther. Bob Metcalfe, the inventor of Ethernet, jokes that Esther treats him like a shabbos goy, because she can rely on him to pick her up from the airport.

The Garden Court Hotel is next, where Esther meets with Bob Horn, a software entrepreneur/idealist who has studied how learning takes place, developed the concept of information mapping, and is gung-ho behind the idea of visual language. After Horn comes a meeting with Randy Fields, of Mrs. Fields' Cookies; he is pushing business-template software. By everyone's happy consent, her next appointment, Apple's Karl Schmidt, does his presentation for Fields and his staff, too.

What's remarkable about Esther's schedule is how integrated the day has been, how each encounter gives grist and data and context to the next, how what and who she knows and the way she thinks create a kind of synergy. In a different century, Esther, who sits on the boards of Perot Systems, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, and the Santa Fe Institute, would have been the mistress of the most influential salon in the capitol. She knows everyone, and she is willing to give almost anyone 30 minutes, if they have interesting things to say. Within her infinitely expandable mental Rolodex she is constantly cross referencing and time stamping. She'll remember someone she met six months ago in Poland and realize he needs to talk to an entrepreneur in Michigan. A portion of Release 1.0 is devoted to "Coming Soon," where readers are invited to contribute exemplars and contacts for specific topics that interest her. What Esther does, in short, is provide a salon bound neither by time nor by space. Most of its habitues will never meet, but they all know Esther.

After the meetings at the Garden Court, Esther goes to dinner with some of her computer-industry-elect peers. She seems more relaxed than she has been all day. No one tries to sell her anything over the meal at Gaylord's restaurant in the Stanford Shopping Center – she's off-duty from the marketplace of ideas. But afterwards, a young entrepreneur hoping for Mayfield Software Partners money makes his pitch. He seems both tech-smart and business-smart, and

Esther asks a few pointed questions to test his knowledge. After his pitch, when the venture capitalists mill around before drifting home, the young man approaches Esther with the reverence of the adoring fan toward an absolutely fabulous celebrity. He attempts pleasant chit-chat, but Esther fades into her MEGO (my eyes glaze over) lack-of- attention mode – it takes over when she perceives someone has nothing valuable to tell her. He doesn't register as a bearer of potential information-barter, so the conversation goes nowhere.

Sister of George Dyson, the world expert on the Greenland kayak, and daughter of renowned visionary astrophysicist and writer Freeman Dyson, Esther didn't start talking until she was 2. But when she did, it was in complete sentences. Now 42, she keeps dashing onto planes in search of technologies that haven't yet been pasteurized. She balances hours of solitude in flight against days of intense encounters with purveyors of ideas. Born and bred to be an academic, in her attempt to create a life separate from that of her distinguished family she has paradoxically created, in the realm of high-tech, a self-funding university of one. Esther meets with the best minds on the planet, writes up her discoveries, and publishes them to a narrow audience of her peers.

The Newsletters

Barely over five feet tall, the lithe and gamine Esther has taken her gifts for understanding and networking and transformed them into two newsletters: Release 1.0 and Rel-EAST. Annual companion conferences for each create power vortexes in their respective markets. The US$2,100 PC Forum can only be attended by subscribers to Release 1.0. In the four years since it started, the US$2,500 East-West High-Tech Forum (it's only US$1,000 if you're from the East), transpires each year at a less-discovered Eastern European site. In 1993 participants gathered in Slovenia, just 120 miles away from the fighting in the former Yugoslavia. Commerce beckons and there are ideas to be shared, even if there's a war going on.

People buy Release 1.0 because they are interested in what Esther is interested in, much as admirers of the former New Yorker film critic Pauline Kael read her columns in order to watch how her mind worked, not necessarily because they agreed with her.

Esther's newsletters have never had a subscriber base much above 1,500, but those 1,500 readers are among the brightest of a huge industry that is dependent on The Next Big Thing. Dick Shaffer, president of Technologic Partners and one of Esther's two main competitors in the lucrative microcomputer newsletter-and-conference business, says that Esther has "a special editorial talent, like a cat's paw print on tissue paper." As Jeff Braun, president of Maxis Software, the company that brought you Sim City, describes it, "Esther's about the future. She jumps off the deep end in every issue of her newsletter." Though she lives and breathes high tech, her work habits are decidedly low-tech: Esther the techno-sibyl doesn't use a laptop and keeps near-Pleistocene computer equipment in her office.

Release 1.0's style is knowing. For example: "Think of selling manufactured goods as selling embodied time on a production line. What's perishable isn't the product, but the resource time used to make it." It relies on the pronouns "you" and "we" a lot, and appropriates from the Western literary canon: "How do I access thee?" she wrote in one issue, "Let me count the ways." No Berkeley feminist, Esther doesn't follow the non-sexist language handbook, relying instead on the conventions of standard English usage, where "he" is used to mean "anyone."

Writing in Release 1.0, Esther was the first analyst in the 1980s to tout the significance of distributed databases, groupware, and object-oriented programming, all hot areas in software today. She was enamored of, and went on at great lengths to explain, artificial life and adaptive computation in 1991. A few 1993 issues mused on groupware and "the commercial meaning of time." Given this eclectic and somewhat abstruse coverage of high-tech, why does anyone even bother to read it? Nat Goldhaber, founder of TOPS and co-chair of Kaleida, jokes that "it's obscure why people subscribe," because the newsletter has little to do with the productization of technology. In fact, it's because Esther shies from semi-conductor coverage, stock-picking, and financial coverage that Shaffer saw a market-opening for his own successful operation, which focuses more on short-term issues for investors. Goldhaber goes on to say that "people want the power that comes associated with her name." About 60 percent of the subscribers are CEOs, venture capitalists, and Wall Streeters. Given the newsletter's tone and price tag, that's not surprising.

Production Values

It's mid-June at Esther's longtime headquarters in the Seagram Building on Park Avenue, a week or two before her EDventure Holdings moves to a spot a few blocks away from Esther's apartment near Washington Square. Before the movers come, Esther is attempting to sort through the famous nest of paper that fills – no, defines – her office. Four-year-old copies of Computerworld, Christmas cards sent from Russian friends, self-addressed, stamped envelopes from supplicants wanting to be part of her information empire – these are piled to archaeological depth on every conceivable surface. Of course, Esther is barefoot, and as she works, she discovers new socks never taken out of their wrappers, a bathing suit never used, and checks from 1987 never cashed.

Intermixed with the preparations for the move, Esther conducts her usual business. She takes a meeting with American businessman Thomas Davidson, who has numerous ventures in Eastern European countries. In her role of factor/handler/go-between, the two discuss the nascent Polish tourist- industry infrastructure (magazines, hotel reservation systems, former Communist-apparat elite hideaways) and the awesome kludgyiness of the Russian banking system. "What a godforsaken country " she says, with affection.

Esther returns her own phone calls. She often calls people "friendly" or "nice," meaning they have interesting ideas and are willing to share them. At one point, she gets on the phone with a puzzled Release 1.0 subscriber, who had sent her a note saying that she felt that maybe Esther's newsletter was too technical for her. Esther finds out that the woman is an entrepreneur with dressmaking software, agrees that the newsletter probably wouldn't meet the needs of this niche-marketer, then recommends that she talk to someone at The New York Times who is in the process of writing an article on women in computing.

The office shelves are filled with decades' worth of unopened demo software. Considering that Esther spends most of her waking hours here, the office

reflects how work-identified she is: There is little that is not computer-related or vendor-donated. But two pieces of art suggest Esther-the-person as opposed to Esther-the-professional. One is a photograph, taken by her mother, of Esther as a four-year-old, smiling next to an old-fashioned typewriter with huge spools for the ribbons. Her mother, mathematician Verena Huber-Dyson, considers it a kind of early proof that Esther would be a writer. The other is a black-and-white drawing, purchased at the Washington Square Art Festival, of three girls in early adolescence peering through a fence. Esther's family comprises four younger half-sisters, one older half-sister, and one full-brother. Maybe the sketch is the only whiff of homeyness Esther needs.

Like all stars, Esther has an immensely personal support crew, and like all Big Thinkers, uses the pronoun "we" a lot. "We" can either mean "me and the other people in my office" or "the computer industry/the US/industrialized society/human beings in general." Central to the operation is Esther's publisher, Daphne Kis, who functions as the business manager for both EDventure Holdings and Esther's private life. It's Daphne who determined that the office needed a better, cheaper, larger space and came up with a cute change-of-address card; Daphne who helped decide that the next East-West High-Tech Forum was going to be held in the Slovenian resort town of Bled; Daphne who saw that the caved-in ceiling of Esther's secondary apartment got fixed. Daphne acts as both business partner and spouse-equivalent, comfortable in her role of managing the Esther-product, making Esther's endlessly peripatetic life possible. Esther comments that if EDventures were publicly held, it would be irresponsible to her stockholders to have someone like Daphne on payroll who, as part of her professional responsibilities, has the role of chief groundskeeper in the landscape of Esther's private life.

Esther also recently took on Gerald Michalski, a former New Science Associates analyst, to write every other issue of Release 1.0. Twelve issues per year of Release 1.0 and four issues per year of Rel-EAST, plus putting on PC Forum and East-West High-Tech Forum, were too much, even for Esther. Jerry shares her polyglot multinational background, and brings a more sociological bent and an interest in Net culture to the newsletter. Fellow newsletter and conference impresario Stewart Alsop says that "Jerry has developed a following on his own," and that "Esther should fish or cut bait," as Alsop himself has done with

PC Letter, the newsletter he created but turned over to another editor so he could return to the helm of InfoWorld. But Esther says she is committed to her newsletters and hired Jerry to make sure they remain healthy.

Where She's Coming From

Swiss-born, Princeton-reared, Esther entered this incarnation in 1951, the same year John Von Neumann pioneered the idea of a programmable, as opposed to hard-wired, computer at the Institute for Advanced Studies (IAS) in Princeton, New Jersey. Brother George thinks there is a karmic perfection to this, because Esther's great love is software, and Esther's childhood best friend, Alice Bigelow, was the daughter of Julian Bigelow, Von Neumann's engineer at the IAS, where Esther's father worked during most of her childhood.

A math prodigy as well as an eloquent writer, father Freeman's passions range from space travel to war-and-peace issues. Her mother Verena was awarded her PhD in mathematics from the same Swiss institution where Einstein studied. Her parents divorced when she was five, and during Esther's childhood her mother hung out with what Esther refers to as "politico math types, like Tom Lehrer and Terry Winograd."

Esther was also effectively stateless for twelve years: because she had a Swiss mother, the British wouldn't claim her; because she had a British father, the Swiss wouldn't claim her. She needed special visas for every country she traveled to with her parents, who created a handwritten passport for her. Freeman says that this probably led to her feeling that she "didn't belong to any particular country."

Freeman recalls an early sign of his daughter's penchant for traveling light and making herself at home anywhere: Esther, age 2, having snuck downstairs, happily curled up asleep in a food trolley. Even now, she has no home phone and only uses her apartment for sleeping. She likens New York to her bedroom, as a place where she knows relatively few people and can get work done. Her social life is in California and Europe.

George Dyson says there are other aspects of Esther's character that asserted themselves in her childhood. "Esther was always wanting to be totally on her own," he says, "totally in control, and out of the shadow of both of our parents. She was also fascinated with money." When she was 12 and living in England with a host family for a year (a project Esther arranged on her own), she asked that her mother put her birthday-present money in an American bank where it would earn higher interest. Freeman used to tease his teenage daughter that all her friends were rich, to which she replied that it just seemed to happen that way. "She was naturally comfortable with people who were successful," he says.

Esther majored in economics at Harvard, and admits she seldom went to class. She spent all of her time at the Crimson, "the ultimate male environment." Even then, Esther had a mindset ahead of her peers. As she had already gone through her Communist stage at age 10 by reading Trotsky et al., by the time she arrived at Harvard she was further along than her classmates: A liberal in a time of radicals, she had already started the move many of her contemporaries would make years later, the shift from lefty to progressive to free-market advocate.

"After seeing in Eastern Europe how debilitating a government can be, I've also seen how some regulation is needed in the transition to a free market," she says. She calls herself a "radical," in the etymologically correct sense of one who responds to root causes.

Here lies another of Esther's many paradoxes: In spite of her libertarian leanings and her identification with the capitalist class, she is in some ways the ultimate hippie. She has constructed a life that adheres to the '60s credo "Follow your bliss and the money will come."

But to find her bliss, Esther took a variety of jobs after she graduated. In 1974 she went to work at Forbes, where she stayed for three years. Part of the true legend of Esther is that while at Forbes, she spent her savings and vacation time on a trip to Japan, where she wrote a seminal article on the threat Japan posed to the US computer industry. At least ten years before the conventional wisdom would arrive at the same conclusion, she predicted that the Japanese threat was in hardware, not software. Her trip to Japan and the article she wrote about it presaged her future as the self-propelled prophet of the computer industry.

Esther left Forbes to work as a securities analyst on Wall Street (she told author Steven Levy that she didn't have the "nastiness" to really make it as prize reporter at Forbes), first for Rothschild and then for Oppenheimer & Co., where after a time she both grew to appreciate the power of venture capital (she was present at the creation of Federal Express) and learned to hate explaining technology over and over again to financial types who didn't get it or weren't interested. Taking a 30-percent pay cut, she left Wall Street to join former Morgan Stanley star analyst Ben Rosen, who had just started his own pulpit: Rosen Electronics Newsletter. Rosen had also formed a venture capital fund, Sevin Rosen, with LJ Sevin, a Dallas semiconductor entrepreneur. This mother of all high-tech venture-capital funds went on to fund Lotus and Compaq.

With his obvious conflict of interest, Rosen sold the newsletter to Esther, a deal initiated in the parking lot of a computer trade show. Esther cleverly retitled the newsletter Release 1.0 and shifted its emphasis from short-takes to thoughtful features. The conference that Rosen linked to the newsletter, PC Forum, continued throughout the 1980s, becoming the annual meeting place of everyone who mattered, or who wanted to matter, in the computer industry.

For a brief time in the mid-1980s, Release 1.0 disappeared. Ziff-Davis, the Microsoft of computer-magazine publishers, bought out EDventure holdings and turned Esther loose on what was to be an exclusive (and expensive) daily newspaper for the computer industry, Computer Industry Daily (CID). It was to be delivered through the MCI mail network, and for reasons ranging from its being headquartered on the wrong coast, to its getting scooped regularly, to its misusing Esther's talents (instead of analyzing technology, she was managing a 29-person newspaper staff), the project was stillborn. Release 1.0 returned to Esther after the demise of CID.

The Russians Are Coming

After reclaiming Release 1.0, in the late 1980s, Esther increasingly turned her attention toward the former Eastern bloc countries. Because of what Metcalfe has termed "her questionable excursions into Eastern Europe," she started a separate quarterly newsletter, Rel-EAST, and an accompanying conference, the East-West High-Tech Forum. Yet by focusing more and more on former Eastern

bloc countries and increasingly on software esoterica, Esther may have created her own marginalization. By wandering ever farther afield from the mainstream of computing, whether intellectually or geographically – even Hungary and Poland and the Czech Republic may have already gone too establishment for her – Esther may be eclipsing her relevance on her own home turf.

Perhaps her tropism toward the east can be traced to her family's European roots – she is, after all, fluent in German, French, and Russian. Maybe it's the appeal of the pent-up intellectual and entrepreneurial energy lurking in those countries. It could be her pleasure in finding the shock of the new, a thrill increasingly difficult in an industry that's ever more professionalized, market researched, and homogenized. Seeking out the Slavs is not that different from the impulse American filmmakers have when they choose foreign cinematographers to shed newer or clearer light on their subjects.

Vladimir Pokhilko, co-inventor of the smash-hit software El-Fish, says that Esther plays a very big role in the new Russian software industry. Esther has suggested, among other things, that the Russians start a software marketing association. She has talked to the Russians extensively about the importance of intellectual property, not just with that which could be copyrighted, but with what in the West is familiarly known as look and feel. "She didn't come to Russia to establish a business," Pokhilko says, "but has helped Russians understand that a business is not just money, but also relationships. Esther knows everybody."

The Woman Thing

Being one of a few highly placed women in the computer industry has always given Esther high visibility. But it's necessarily had its drawbacks: She finds it somewhat annoying that people are more likely to draw comparisons between her, and let's say, Merrill Lynch's Michelle Preston, than with a male computer

analyst. And while it would probably bore her to discuss it further, and it's arguably sexist to draw attention to it, Esther's image and career trajectory within a male-dominated industry have been directly affected by her gender.

One thing that Esther has to contend with is that women, no matter how accomplished, are often in some measure judged by who they're involved with – or if they're involved with anyone at all. With men, it's usually not considered a terribly salient personality-indicator that they have lemon- haired trophy wives, or carry on with romance philologists, or have never had a date. This double-standard of scrutiny applies in force with Esther, for everyone wants to know about the personal life of a woman who is so one-of-a-kind, so puckish, so elusive, and so well-connected. For the record, she is childless and unmarried. "I like babies, and I'm close to my family, but I don't think I'd be a good parent," she says. "I like to be off on my own, and I like my privacy, and I think I'd be hard to live with. I'm also picky."

Asking Esther who she's dating seems about as appropriate as asking Janet Reno the same question. And it seems impertinent to wonder whether she's lonely, what with her jetting around all the time and working constantly. Labeling her as just another brilliant nerd who pays less attention to social niceties misses the point. Esther says because her private life is just that – private – and possibly because her hair has gotten ever shorter over the years, it's even been rumored that she's a lesbian. She volunteers that she isn't. In fact, Esther is so private that even those in her office don't know the status of her current romantic involvements. Esther's most public liaison was with Bill Ziff, the Bill Gates of the computer publishing world and twenty years her senior.

But Esther provokes a troubling question: How eccentric can we let our women be? If Esther were a guy, no one would remark on her lack of domesticity, her single-minded dedication to her work, her conscious devotion of almost no energy to her private life. The high-tech world is littered with brilliant male geeks and gurus and grifters who act just like this, who wear nothing but T-shirts and don't even have Esther's aplomb as manifested in regular haircuts and exercise. And no one gives a thought to the workaholic, single-minded quality of their lives. Would people be as catty if it were a guy who showed up at a press conference with hair dripping wet from the pool, barefoot and in jeans

topped by a computer- industry freebie T-shirt, who sat on the floor in the aisle and asked questions that clearly showed off insider knowledge?

Esther, of course, has a typically nuanced view of her place in the gender-differentiations of the high-tech world. She feels that being a woman has given her "a net-net advantage" in the circles in which she's traveled. "Especially when I was younger and cuter," she says, "people spent lots of hours explaining things."

And no doubt her low-key, tomboyish presentation, her occasional luminous grin, combined with her fine analytical intelligence has stood her in good stead throughout the years. "Being a woman is a disadvantage within the system, but an advantage being on your own," she says. "I might have been more mainstream if I were a guy; I might have wanted to be Bill Gates," she adds.

Yet Esther says that perhaps she is more like a man, in that she measures her success by what she's achieved, rather than by more personal and conventionally female measures of love and family.

But there's a catch here, another of her paradoxes. In spite of her lifelong fascination with finance, Esther is not materialistic, and she doesn't base her self-worth on the amount of money she makes or the number of toys she has. Her definition of success may vary from the conventional one of conspicuous money and power.

For example, Esther acts as a financial Peace Corps volunteer, gratis, in the former Eastern bloc countries. "I'm uncomfortable with the idea of altruism; I do things because I like to do them," she says. What Esther is doing there, aside from creating attendees for her new Eastern European conference and acquiring new subscribers for her newsletters, is creating an ever-widening circle of people who like her, share ideas with her, and can in turn lead her to other people with interesting ideas and interesting activities. She's found a place where people can use her help. A female George Soros, her philanthropy has to do with making connections, not cash grants.

Feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan has pointed out that women often prefer to operate more in a way that fosters the interconnectedness of networks of relationships rather than in a way that is strictly competitive. This may be truer of Esther than she realizes. As she herself says: "Some people like to do the work. I just like putting people near each other."

She did this in a deliberate way in the 1980s, with famous dinner parties in Silicon Valley and New York. The computer industry returned the favor, hosting a 40th birthday party for which her family and friends flew in for an evening at Apple chief scientist Larry Tesler's house. More than 100 people from all over the country attended. "We just love her," says Bob Metcalfe.

Who Wants Yesterday's Paper? Who Wants Yesterday's Girl?

Maybe because of her increasing focus on Eastern Europe, or maybe for other reasons, some people (there are those multiple requests for anonymity again) say Esther's relevance may be waning. Alsop says "the business has become more business-oriented, and Esther has gotten more bored." Indeed, Esther says she initially got interested in Eastern Europe because US industry has gotten too "straight." Or, as Alsop says, "Esther is interested in nerdy eggheads and nerdy eggheads are less prominent in the business these days."

Release 1.0 also has it critics. It's been called "unreadable," "about as close to drivel as you can come," "making obscure issues that are clear," and "intellectually satisfying, but not a must-read." It's been said that Esther's the queen of the idee fixe: Once she takes to a notion about a person, a technology – anything – little can be done to change her mind.

There are also intimations that PC Forum, her main moneymaker, may have lost its edge. (The newsletters merely break even, but you have to subscribe to the newsletters to attend the conferences. Only 500 are allowed into PC Forums and they always sell out.) One long-time attendee sniffed "too many users and accountants now attend it" instead of just the marketing and technology geniuses of the future. Metcalfe says "she's sometimes made bad speaker choices," although, as has always been acknowledged, the action at the Forum is in the hallways.

Alsop's "Agenda" conferences may be increasingly perceived as the cooler place to be, if only because they are newer, and the first ever to offer her any serious competition. One source commented that the reason that Alsop's conference may be perceived to be waxing and Esther's waning is the difference in their personal style. Alsop's persona is approachable and bearlike; Esther's is cooler and more austere. Imagine the difference between two parties (for that is what these conferences are: the Bohemian Groves of high-tech) where one host is palsy-walsy and the other aloof. If Esther were to go out for pizza, it would be with a bunch of scientists to discuss ideas. With Alsop, it might be conceivable that he would want to talk about things other than technology.

Another criticism leveled at Esther is that her lack of focus on what's being called convergence media is pushing her out of the mainstream of what's really happening in the computer industry today. As the computer industry is increasingly commoditized, her interest in software esoterica may push her ever farther away from the zeitgeist.

Esther counters this by saying that she is "personally interested" in all of this, but "so is everyone and his brother. I'm not uniquely qualified to write about it" and so would prefer to go where everyone else is not. Esther is also more interested in what she calls "the commercial stuff," because once entertainment enters the picture "things stop making sense. Things start getting emotional." This doesn't interest her. "Artistic judgments have to be made, and those are subjective" – not evaluations she is interested in making. As Braun says, "Esther is not an artist."

Finally, there is the question of the generation-gap. Esther is, after all, of the generation, now in more comfortable middle-age, that made the microcomputer industry happen. And while it is true that these friends-of- Esther have the money to fund young entrepreneurs coming up, they are not young entrepreneurs themselves. Do the twenty-somethings who will be creating the next round of technowealth even read newsletters, or do they get everything off the Net? Through an entirely unscientific sampling technique, it wasn't that difficult to find three under-30s who should have heard of her but hadn't: a 28-year-old editor at a West Coast computer magazine, a 29-year-old compiler-freak of a Cal Tech grad student, a 22- year-old new hire (Harvard, '93) at a Big

Six accounting firm who specializes in systems consulting and new media. All three had heard of Alsop and Shaffer. This Esther blind-spot would have been inconceivable five to ten years ago.

Looking Prophetically Eastward

As early as 1985, in an interview in PC Magazine, Esther mentioned getting bored with the newsletter and the possibility of getting into venture capital. Of course, her newsletter business has gone through several incarnations since then: CID, back to Release 1.0, decreasingly product- oriented, the new newsletter on Eastern Europe. And in April 1992, she became a limited partner in Mayfield Software Partners, where her name has marquee value.

But as someone who is more interested in ideas than feelings, Esther might not be that successful as a full-time venture capitalist. Ann Winblad, of Hummer Winblad, says "being a venture capitalist is a challenging but pragmatic set of problems, but it's not an intellectual experience. You have an extraordinary amount of bonding, and you have to have lots of willingness to hire and fire people." By contrast, Esther's forte is "hanging out with the technologically oddball stuff," a gift for spotting technology trends and people that could matter, as opposed to identifying companies that will turn profitable.

It's hard to predict where Esther might go if indeed she does decide to leave the newsletter-and-conference business behind, because as her long- time friend Bill Kutik points out, "Esther's figured out a way to get paid to do exactly what she wants to do." Whether she stays with her current business or moves on to something else, she'll probably do just fine. George may have the last, best word on his sister: "If you act like you're the smartest person in the school, and you have the intelligence and street-smarts to back it up, you can convince others of it, too."

Street Myths About Esther

Swimming junkie. True.
Gets up at 4:30 am every day so she can swim a mile and a half; belongs to health clubs in Silicon Valley, Manhattan, and Moscow. Won't stay in hotels that don't have pools, and when faced with a full day of skiing, will still negotiate with the management of the condo or hotel for the pool to be opened up early for her daily swim. Responsible for addicting others in Silicon Valley to swimming. Brother George says that even as a child "Esther loved pools, so she got to pick out the motel where we'd stay by which had the best pool."

Really smart. True.
Entered Harvard at age 16 with multiple 800 scores on her achievement tests. "About 30 to 40 points above the Mensa average," says Kleiner Perkins venture capitalist John Doerr.

Ruthless information-processing machine. True.
Reads every piece of mail entering her office. Lotus senior vice president KC Branscomb says that Esther will take piles of trade magazines with her to read on a ski lift, and when she gets to the top, "place them lightly in her bag, and beat everyone down the slope in great style." Famous for making piles of litter in the first-class section of airplanes as she rips through publications. Longtime friend Bill Kutik says that Esther can remember 500 phone numbers at a time.

Visionary. True.
Even Esther's long-running interest in artificial intelligence, which many Esther-critics scoff at as having been intellectually interesting but commercially useless, has its defenders: Ethernet inventor Bob Metcalfe says that "artificial intelligence has emerged as one of the fundamental technologies. It's just embedded in other things." Metcalfe also says that at least five times in the last year, Esther has sent him an issue of her newsletter covering a subject he discussed in his weekly column for Infoworld, only Esther had covered it a year or two before. And writer Eric Marcus, once on the staff of her Computer Industry Daily, says "Esther was wearing T-shirts and pearls long before they ended up in Gap ads "

Matchmaker. True.
The number of people Esther has brought together, either to share ideas,

combine ideas with capital, or make some other connection, is too numerous to count. Esther pointed out Powersoft, maker of client-server tool-kits, to venture capitalists Humer-Winblad, who then invested in the firm. Powersoft then went very happily and profitably public in February 1993. At Esther's 1991 PC Forum, Powersoft was also invited to be one of eight companies demonstrating products in the basement, leading to a US$21- million contract with Dun and Bradstreet software, a tremendous coup for the then-startup. The contract also enabled Dun and Bradstreet to make the leap from being a somewhat passe mainframe-based fuddy-duddy to being a state-of-the-art applications software company.

Likes older powerful men. Sort of true, but not what it sounds like.
As a merchant banker in ideas, Esther likes being around the feudal princes of the information economy. And with her love affair with ideas, Esther can have a quasi-love-affair with the idea-holder, but it's probably more the ideas that hold the allure. But yes, Esther truly does seem to have a talent for getting along with smart, older, powerful men, such as mentor Ben Rosen, only one of a string of such types who appreciate her good mind. Perhaps a skill she learned at home as a child, when galaxy-class physicists such as Hans Bethe, Richard Feynmann, and Edward Teller hung out with her equally amazing father, Freeman?

Almost married Bill Ziff. True.
The genius behind the computer magazine empire Ziff-Davis, and considered by most folks a genius in non-publishing areas of life as well, Ziff is the man Esther came closest to marrying. He really did have her entire apartment remodeled when she was away on a trip for a week and a half. Esther feels she learned how to handle money vis a vis her family from Ziff, useful because Esther is by far the wealthiest member of her family (she purchased a house for her sister in California and regularly hands out her scads of frequent flyer awards to her family members). But no, despite rumors to the contrary, Ziff did not shut down her Computer Industry Daily and break up with Esther at the same time. "Things were already getting rocky between us that summer," Esther says, and CID was shut down later, in the early fall. Esther says that they broke up because "he wanted a wife."