T h e   R o a d   L e s s   T r a v e l e d

Stop and smell the policy

by *Lorrie Faith Cranor*

For those of us who spend our days in the halls of computer science departments around the world, it's easy to take the Internet for granted.

For many of us, the Internet is a tool, a toy, and a communication channel all rolled up into one. Most of us have never actually seen the Internet, but we've been there. We are familiar with the landscape and we know how to navigate it. We are, by our own declaration, citizens of cyberspace.

As students, most of us don't directly pay to use the Internet. Some of us are aware that somep must be paying for it, but that is generally of little concern to us. As far as we are concerned, it is our Internet to do with what we want.

For me, the Internet has become indispensable. I send email to almost everyone I know. Even my grandmother has email. When I had only two weeks to write a research paper as part of my doctoral qualifying examinations, the World Wide Web helped me track down and retrieve information without the delay of postal mail. And this summer I commuted daily from Kensington, Maryland to St. Louis, Missouri via the information superhighway.

But while enjoying life on the still relatively unpopulated Internet terrain, I am worried that the future of the Net might not be so idyllic. Alas, the Internet, like every other human social creation, is fraught with political squabbles and legal tangles.

The scientists and the soldiers (well actually the scientists who worked for the soldiers) were the first to set up camp on the new electronic frontier. But they have since been joined by doctors, lawyers, librarians, libertarians, poets, perverts, elementary school students, and everyone else who managed to buy, borrow, or steal rights to an on-ramp. Now that the Internet is being populated by diverse and often self interested groups, people have begun to draw battle lines in the digital sand.

When two lawyers recently ``spammed'' the Internet by posting an advertisement for their services to every newsgroup in existence, they made people aware that the old laws of ``netiquette'' only work when people voluntarily follow them. As of yet, there are no Internet police officers. But as the Net becomes increasingly commercialized, businesses may demand that somep impose some law and order in all the chaos.

Already parents who have discovered that their children could learn some pretty unwholesome lessons while exploring the Internet are concerned about the use of the Net in elementary schools. ``Either those dirty pictures must go or my kid's got to learn the old fashioned way,'' they tell the media who run sensational stories about how taxpayer money is being spent to put pornography on the Net. If only dirty pictures were the worst of what's out there.…

And what about those dreams of electronic democracy? Of universal access? Of putting an Internet connection in every pot? Of empowering the people to make their voices heard? Ah, if it were only that easy. As USACM chairperson Barbara Simons told the attendees of the 1994 Computers, Freedom, and Privacy Conference last March, ``I worry that when people talk about electronic democracy, they might be serious.'' Despite its diversity, the Internet as we know it is hardly representative of our society. It is inhabited predominantly by an elite group of college educated, English-speaking men. Who will pay to bring the rest of the human population onto the Net? When people are hungry and homeless, will they want donations of keyboards and wires before donations of food and shelter?

Nonetheless, the Internet has given a voice to some people who previously didn't have one. It has enabled physically disabled people to ``get out and meet'' people without leaving their homes. It has given doctors and scientists in developing countries access to information they need to improve the living conditions of the people around them. And it has allowed geographically diverse people with common interests to form ``virtual'' communities. The members of some of these communities were upset to

learn recently that people might someday be billed according to their Net usage. If that happened, people wouldn't be so eager to set up mailing lists from their personal, university, or business accounts.

This brings us back to the question, who will pay for the information superhighway? According to Jamie Love of the Taxpayer Assets Project, the telephone companies who have NSF contracts to operate the high-speed network backbone and the major network on-ramps are in favor of putting a meter on the Net and pricing it as they currently price long distance telephone service. Then again, if some of the cable television companies have their way, you will pay for the information superhighway by buying products on a 500 channel super-home-shopping-network.

Recently there have been a number of press releases issued by telephone and cable companies announcing pilot projects to wire communities to the information superhighway. But before you get too excited about the prospect of your own personal high speed connection to the Net, read the fine print. The highway these companies are talking about only carries pay-per-view programming and commercials. It's not even connected to the Internet! For the most part, when computer science students talk about the information superhighway, we are referring to the current Internet, perhaps with higher bandwidth and direct connections to our homes. But communications companies and policy makers don't always think along these lines.

There are many decisions to be made about the future of the United State's national Information Infrastructure and its counterparts in other countries. The White House, Congress, the National Research Council, the National Science Foundation, cable television companies, telephone companies, and a variety of professional and public interest organizations are currently examining the possibilities. More information on the policies advocated by some of these agencies and organizations is available on the World Wide Web. Information I prepared for a computers and society course which I teach (http://cec.wustl.edu/~cs142/internet.html) includes pointers to articles about the Internet and organizations that make information available on the Net.

As computer science students, most of us know more about the Internet than the policy makers who are making important decisions about its future. Therefore, it is important that as we cruise down the information superhighway, we stop every now and then to sniff the policy. We must contribute to the policy debates that will shape the environment in which we communicate, work, and play. After all, it is our Internet.