



Review of *Bandits on the Information Superhighway*

by [Paul Rubel](#)

Book Reviews

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[Bandits on the Information Superhighway](#) is not what most people expect from an O'Reilly book. Buying this book is like going to the grocery store to get some bread and buying a candy-bar instead; once you open it and try it, you are glad that you splurged on it. *Bandits* is not a hard-core technical manual, but rather a common sense guide to the goings on of the Internet, specifically designed for the novice user. Written by [Daniel Barrett](#), an [ACM student member](#) working on his Ph.D. at the [University of Massachusetts](#), it lives up to the title of its series, ``What You Need to Know.''

One of the most noteworthy aspects of the book is Barrett's treatment of a subject that often gets overblown in popular media. He reiterates throughout the book that dangers are definitely out there but the majority of people are in fact what they seem. Barrett begins by asserting ``Most people who use the Internet behave honestly." He then continues onward to show some of the dangers associated with the various means of communications available on the Internet, such as FTP, telnet, Usenet, IRC and talk.

Barrett attempts to educate people on the dangers of schemes and frauds. Through common sense he shows the problems with: pyramid schemes, buying free information, the boy who wants to break the record for most get-well cards (please don't send him any more), and many others. Anyone who debunks the ``Good Times'' hoax earns a place of respect in my heart. I'm amazed that I still encounter people worrying about n-th complexity binary loops, which ``Good-Times'' supposedly causes, burning out their processors. Although I have a personal bias towards the issue, there is no doubt that new users need to be informed about such hoaxes. **Netiquette** (proper etiquette for the 'Net) is another topic that new users need to be informed of, and Barrett spends a lot time on good manners, cross posting instead of multiple posts, as well as at least four pages on the correct place to post different kinds of ads.

I have little personal experience with Internet Relay Chat (IRC), basically an electronic party line. After reading about it, I have an ``airplane view'' of IRC; I understand the general layout, but the specifics have not been filled in yet. One of these generalities is *bots*. Bots are programs on IRC that act like users. On one hand they can do good things like transfer files or answer questions, on the other hand they may flood you with worthless text or send out false messages. Like bots, people on IRC may not always be what they seem, though most are still not trying to deliberately mislead. Barrett inserts common sense for dealing with face to face meetings: call people before you decide to meet them, and don't meet them alone. After talking about the general dangers, Barrett moves on to love a-la IRC. About half the chapter falls into this category. Although finding love doesn't seem prevalent enough to devote half a chapter to, perhaps it will as more people get on-line.

When talking about security, Barrett is careful to always speak of miscreants as *crackers*, leaving the negative connotation off of hackers. It's a nice touch. There is also a side-note that explicitly explains the differences between these two words. Throughout the book these side-notes are on the edge of every page. They give specific examples of the generalities being discussed. For example, Barrett tells how all sorts of things are for sale in the Usenet, but Jay Brown's quote about someone selling a carload of chicken feet demonstrates the point. Along-side a quote from a particular person is often a drawing of the speaker, an extra that allows me to put a face with names of such notables as [Tim O'Reilly](#), [Joel Furr](#), and even Barrett himself.

Bandits on the Information Superhighway is an interesting book. While it is geared towards the novice user, even old hats will find something new. This is the sort of thing

that the on-line service providers should send with those floppy disks they give out so freely. If all new users knew even half of what was inside, Internet relations would be much smoother. If you know someone who is just getting their first account, this book will be very helpful in explaining the non-technical aspects of the Internet. It may save you from having to answer questions, and keep them from getting into common, but easily avoided, problems. *Bandits on the Information Superhighway* gives you ``what you need to know" to start out on the Internet.