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Rich's Ramblings

by Rich Schinnell

This month, I am going to talk about E-mail (electronic mail) and the pitfalls of progress. Everyone is getting into the act to provide either Internet access, Prodigy, America-On-Line, Genie, or CompuServe mail. The US Post Office, I am sure, is gearing up to be an E-mail provider to reduce the physical handling of letters and such. FAX machines are running rampant, and most progressive companies are trying to get to the paperless office. We seem to be headed for a crisis very shortly. Read on to see what can happen, and probably will. The Information Age is overtaking us. Will it bury us?

Information Overload

Information overload is defined, by many people, as having more information available to you than you can read, absorb, or otherwise assimilate.

With the number of computer oriented magazines and newspapers being published, no one can possibly read them all. With the popularity of E-mail, and access to more BBSs and the Internet, it's getting worse, not better. Even the President is getting into the act. President Clinton and Vice President Gore are receiving hundreds, if not thousands, of E-mail messages each day via Internet. (Internet is an international network connecting most of the world's educational institutions and businesses together via their in-house host machines.)

If you stop and think a minute, you'll realize there is no way that the White House could even begin to read all those messages, let alone answer them. This brings up the thought, "What good will it do to send them an E-mail message of my thoughts on the latest budget bill?" Probably none, except to make you feel better, that you got something off your chest. Not to worry, computer technology is coming to the White House, according to a speaker that I listened to at a local meeting. The White House communications wizards are working on a computer system that will scan your incoming E-mail, and based on key words in your message either generate a relevant canned reply, or forward your message to an appropriate government agency. If you put the wrong keywords in your message, it may be forwarded to the FBI!

How Does it Feel to Communicate with Another Computer?

The White House is not the only place that receives lots of mail. Think about the rich and famous, like Bill Gates and Philippe Kahn. I would be willing to bet that their E-mail addresses are [Microsoft](#)> billg@microsoft.com and kahnp@borland.com respectively. You could experiment, and get E-mail delivered to them. Can you imagine how either would ever get any work accomplished if they had to wade through hundreds of E-mail messages each day?

Of course, the solution to the problem of receiving too many messages is to give up and not read any of them, to dump them all on a mail room group to read, and either respond with form letters or pass along to technical support. I would also bet that Bill Gates and Philippe Kahn each have pseudonyms, so that they can receive mail from the people with whom they wish to communicate, without having to read all the mail from customers who have discovered the Internet.

This brings up a situation where we have to decide whether it is worth it to clog up the Internet and other message providers with traffic that is either not read by the recipient or overloads them with information.

At some point in the future, everyone will be able to send and receive mail from their homes much more simply than we now do. When more ISDN (Integrated Systems Data Network) terminations are installed, your copper phone lines will have the capability of providing instant communications, and allow sending and receiving E-mail messages along with your regular phone service, cable-TV channels, and the local newspaper. All on one pair of copper wires. Just think, you can send out your Christmas newsletter to hundreds of friends and customers in a matter of seconds from a simple little terminal in your kitchen. No more hiding in your computer room dungeon creating message traffic. Your kitchen terminal will have a voice response unit and allow you to really ramble.

To help President Clinton, and all of us, with the number of messages and how to deal with them, the market for Artificial Intelligence (AI) terminals that will automatically answer your E-mail will blossom. After all, you wouldn't want to slight your Aunt Ruth or Uncle Robert, as they might not remember you in their will if you ignore their E-mail. Programming one of these devices will mean that you will have to spend time thinking up key words that will trigger standard responses about special events in your life that you want to make sure that everyone knows about.

What is the Bottom Line?

We must have some way of filtering out the E-mail that we want and need to read. The solution should be pretty simple. It could begin by assigning a priority number or code on all messages, very similar to the different classes of U.S. Mail we have now. Close friends will be able to send first class, and others would go other classes.

Now you say, "How do I make sure I get through to the people I need to?" Voila! Special key words, like a code, will trigger the AI machine to alert you that a special message has been received and print it for you to read without having to wade through all the junk E-mail. Some of our members are already getting to the point of saturation with E-mail and trying to figure out what to read and what to throw away. This is already getting to be a serious problem for many of us. We are now using Internet addresses in the front of Monitor.

To speed up the proliferation of documents, Adobe has announced a new product called Acrobat. Acrobat will allow you to send fully formatted documents to most any computer platform there is, yet retain all the formatting. PDF (Portable Document Format) will allow you to place graphics and formatted text in your document. The recipient will be able to see the document on their screen or printer exactly as you created it, including the 25 font changes on each page. No longer will you have to be content with viewing mail in plain old ASCII text. The PDF formatting will allow you to see a real document, not the plain old text version. Should be wonderful and have lots of possibilities. I just can't wait.

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