

Learning to Live With the Web in the 21st Century

Sept. 11 changed things. We still do not know if, collectively, we will be willing to carry national identity cards and tolerate reduced personal liberties while, perhaps, being intolerant of the rights of others to speak out, despite our First Amendment tradition. But some things are clear. The Internet emerged as a source of information for millions as the tragic events of that day unfolded. Web sites for news provided details about the paths of the planes, the structures of the towers, the efforts of rescuers, and lists of the missing, along with many other types of information, updated each day and night. Still, Internet news sources have not displaced traditional news media. Nearly everyone turned to television after learning of the attack. Many listened to radio and read newspapers, as has been true of other events, such as

the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 and the explosion of the Challenger in 1986. The ability of the traditional news media — television, radio, newspapers and certainly magazines — to transform a series of chaotic events into an understandable narrative is very strong. But in a way, the Internet becomes a nearly instant library of news fragments. The Internet puts the ability to assemble stories into the hands of individuals in the news audience, if members of the audience have Internet access (and about half of Americans do), time and commitment. Clearly, we are still learning how to live with the Internet, with all its possibilities for gathering information and reaching out to others. As citizens we have been able to connect with one another for hundreds of years, via mail

and travel. The 19th century added telegraph and telephone. Recently we have faxes and Internet connections. We connect in many ways. So what is new? The ability to connect with one another so easily — interactivity and near-immediate feedback are the key — means that we can find other people with views like ours regardless of where they are in the world and communicate with them. We do not need to be alone if we have access to the Web. We do not have to take time to write a letter, look up an address, buy a stamp, drive to the post office. At times Internet communication takes on elements of person-to-person contact. While some individuals are passive lurkers on the Web, others find marriage partners online and organize

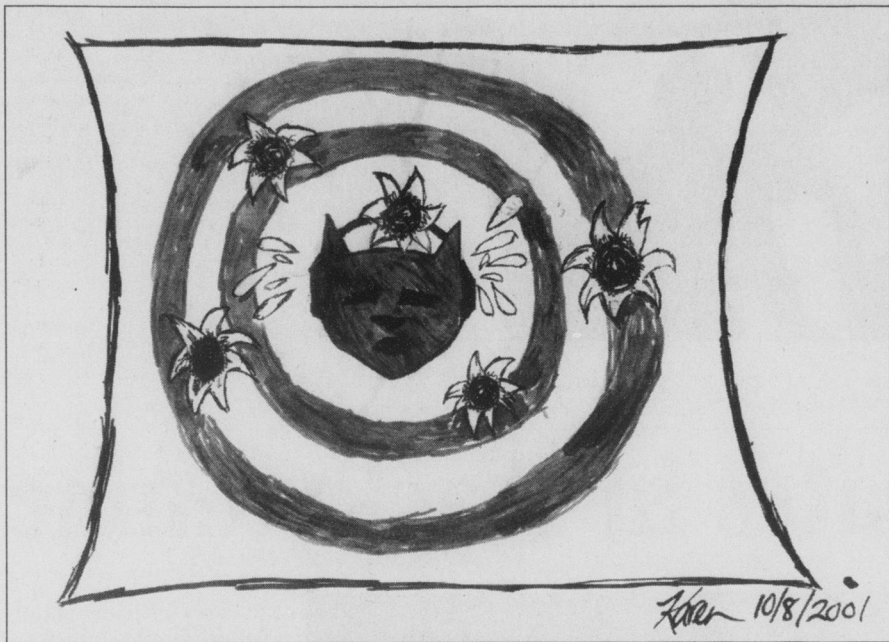
for political action, such as did some of the groups that assembled in 1999 in Seattle to protest a meeting of the World Trade Organization. In some cases, protesters met and organized on the Internet and had never seen each other before they gathered in that city. They organized in space, so to speak. Still, for all its interactivity, the Internet seems to be following the course of other developing historic communication media. Two of my students, Brad Hamm of Elon University and Randy Patnode of Xavier University, studied the evolution of commercial radio in the 1920s and concluded that this truly mass medium — which amazed people by broadcasting sounds through the air — evolved rather rapidly through four stages, roughly labeled as 1. awe, 2. renewal, 3. reality, and 4. marketplace routine. At first we are astonished by a new

communication medium and tend to play with it, but soon we feel that the new development will bring us renewal in education or arts or responsive government. Then, as with radio, we have to find ways to pay for the new medium (historically, in the United States, that has been the role of advertisers and consumers). That is economic reality. Finally, as the medium develops, things fall into a marketplace routine once support is assured. One scholar, Calder Pickett of the University of Kansas, found a similar pattern after the 1844 invention of the telegraph. The telephone also amazed people at first, as did the first simple popular cameras. All media evolve. That is true of the evolving Web. We are past the sense of awe, and just leaving the period in which we see the Internet as the source of our renewal,

although we are exploring the role of distance education (as we should) and possibilities for voting online. Now we are in the period in which we are seeing the market search for ways to pay for the new medium. Some students have created profitable businesses on the Web. Some students work for Web news outlets. The Internet is proving its worth in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks as people use the new medium to discuss how to balance our need for public safety with our traditional liberties. It seems likely that we will learn to fit the Internet to the needs of our lives, as we have with all media that we have confronted and absorbed. And we are only in the first decade of the 21st century. Donald Shaw is a Kenan Professor of Journalism and Mass Communication. Reach him at cardinal@email.unc.edu.

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Rockin' in the Free World: Life in a Post-Napster Era

Last year at about this time the biggest issue of discussion among most people involved with popular music was the legal battle between the recording industry and Napster over music downloads. According to the record biz, music fans were downloading enormous amounts of music from Napster for free, cutting the artists (and the record company) out of what would otherwise have been many millions of dollars in income. It was absolutely accurate, of course, that music fans were downloading a substantial amount of music.

For instance, my History of Rock Music course requires students to listen to music contained on ten 90-minute tapes during the course of the semester. In previous years, frequent use would cause tapes to get eaten in machines or jam — especially in the rush to get everything just before exams. Last fall was the first time that there were no tape problems whatsoever — almost everybody was getting the music on Napster instead.

It is clear to many who have spent any time in the music business and have even a passing familiarity of the law that downloading copyrighted music without permission is illegal. In discussions with my students, however, it always came out that most did not want to have to pay for all the music they gathered onto their hard drives.

I have heard a number of arguments attempting to justify this practice (after all, few will argue to pay for something they are currently getting for nothing), but none of these rationalizations is convincing. In an important way, the record companies were right: Getting music for free on Napster was against the law. With the shutdown and subsequent neutering of Napster, the music biz seemed to emerge from last fall's MP3 shootout the winner. But in another important way, the music biz was the loser.

Throughout the last year, the music-biz types have shown once again that most of them cannot see very far beyond the most immediate bottom line. What the biz seemed not to realize was that Napster played an important role in revitalizing music within youth and young-adult culture — that the digital downloads the biz fought so hard to stop had actually stimulated music sales that might not ever have been there without them. The rise of Napster changed the way a lot of young people approached music. While a CD might cost \$15, free music could be had by anyone with a computer

and a modem. And since the music was free, listeners tended to explore more music and a wider range of musical styles than they otherwise might have, downloading a lot of music just to try it out. While on the face of it this would seem to keep listeners from buying CDs, it actually turned out that the opposite was the case: with music playing an increasingly central role in their lives, younger listeners bought more music. And what the music business didn't understand was that once hooked on music in this way, these listeners would continue to buy music in greater quantities than their older brothers and sisters had.

The smart move for the record companies would have been to find a way of tapping into the mania for downloading, devising a strategy that would allow them to get their cut while encouraging listeners to keep exploring and trying out new music.

But what they did instead was work to stop all digital downloading, creating a tremendous amount of resentment among an entire generation of customers, whose complaints were soon joined by those of veteran musicians like Roger McGuinn, who argued he'd never earned much money from his records anyway. In the short run, the record companies were right; but in the long run they made a serious mistake. They haven't stopped MP3 file-sharing and they never will.

What they need to be doing is rethinking their business in order to exploit this new interest in music — rethinking, for example, the idea of fixed versions of songs that appear on units called "albums" and taking advantage of the many new opportunities for creativity that digital technology provides. Rock history offers many instances in which most of the record biz could not think outside the box, leading labels to make bad decisions that ended up costing them money.

The recent Napster flap is part of a pattern that goes back at least as far as 1955. The upside in all this is that mistakes by the major labels have tended to lead to innovation by others. So will the new Sam Phillips or Ahmet Ertegun please step forward?

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Access Denied: The Information Superhighway Meets a Dead End

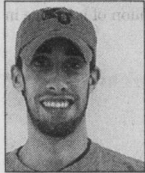
Let us now take a little trip in the WABAC machine. Let's revisit a time in American history when life was innocent, a time when our values and priorities were wholesome and simple.

But how far back do we need to go? At the very least, we know that we must go back to Sept. 10, but let's take it further to a time when the single-season home run record was still 61.

Let's find a time when our dreams were coming true on a daily basis. A time when new frontiers were being explored and prosperity was the norm for a nation dealing with a whole new set of parameters.

So let's set the WABAC with these instructions and see where it takes us ...

Here we are, 1997. This was an era that was characterized by a booming economy and a nation full of confidence, despite some naughty indiscretion in the White House. As for the buoyant economy and prosperity, it was rooted in the dot-com market. Internet stocks were priming a new generation for early retirement to exotic ports-of-call. America was basking in the warming glow of their monitors and modems. Life was good, as long as you had a PC, an ISP and a broker.



JOSEPH FORMISANO
POINT OF VIEW

Germany's autobahn was nothing compared to the information über-highway.

In June of 2001, New England native Bill Simmons closed up shop on his Digital City Boston-based site. He had spent four years writing pop culture/sports columns under the title "The Boston Sports Guy." He since landed a featured role at ESPN.com's "Page 2." He addressed his loyal readers a few days before the move, saying a new era had begun — the "end of the free Internet era." Simmons stated, "I think we'll remember 1997-2000 as the glory days of the Internet, when things resembled an all-you-can-eat buffet and you could pick and choose whatever you wanted to read." He continued by saying that within two years, everything on the net will be subscription-based, pay-to-read and self-sufficient. "And if you think this isn't going to happen," he wrote, "you're fooling yourself."

Another aspect of that bygone time was free Internet access. While millions of people were clinging to America Online and paying for the privilege, many services began offering the same benefits for free. Excite, Lycos, AltaVista, College Club, Blue Light, Free!, Net Zero and Juno (along with others) presented the opportunity

to surf for free.

The combination of free, unlimited access and free, unlimited information was a surreal experience. People were gaining knowledge 24 hours a day, and as they became more savvy navigators, the learning curve became exponential.

Every step we took, though, was made with trepidation. We knew that nothing that good could possibly last too long.

And it didn't. It's usually very difficult to make an American pay for something that was once provided for free. But ever since the net flourished with unabashed inclusion, it has felt like someone pulled the proverbial plug on the Internet's bathtub of free stuff.

Sites that were free now require membership names and passwords. (And don't even think about using the same ones for multiple sites, you'd only be asking that your identity be stolen and assumed by cyber-pirates.)

The free ISP servers are dwindling toward extinction. The few that are left now limit log on time and bombard users with pop-up ads that waste precious seconds.

The information super-highway is now littered with toll booths. Access denied.

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A History of the Internet and The E-Revolution That Wasn't

When I was asked to comment on either "the misconceptions surrounding online advertising" or "the collapse of the tech market," it occurred to me that the two subjects are more than a little related.

Here was this new technology that was going to change not only marketing but the way we think of business itself. E-everything was the wave of the future, in full flood.

Flood, all right. Flood of red ink. What went wrong?

1. Technology is not a substitute for a sound business idea. People started businesses on the Internet that no one with half a brain would have opened in a bricks-and-mortar store, where at least you can sell the fixtures if you fail.

There's still only one way to found a business that will survive: Find an unmet consumer need and satisfy it. Henry Ford's genius wasn't the technology of mass production; it was identifying a need people didn't even know they had. "People would buy a heckuva lot of motorized buggies," he said to himself, "if only I could figure out how to make them for, say, \$700 or so." The application of technology came second, as a means of satisfying the need he'd been observant enough to foresee.

The question shouldn't be, "What can we do with this new technology?" but rather, "What is it that people need or want that the new technology might make possible?"

2. Just because we can do something doesn't mean that we should. Did we really have a burning need to buy groceries over the Internet? Ummm ... no. Was there a crisis in pet supplies

that a sock puppet could solve? It's amusing that the sock puppet survived, while the ill-conceived Pets.com business passed away.

Most companies' first foray into the cyberworld was to produce brochureware. GE put its 1,500-page catalog of engineered plastics on the Web. Oh, joy.

Was that what its customers wanted? Well, no. Funny you should ask, they said. We don't want to root through 1,500 pages to find what we want. What we want to do is tell you what the problem is that we need to solve and have you look up a solution for us. Oh. Interactivity. Responsiveness. Dialogue. What a concept.

3. Every new technology has to find its own way, and often that involves a lot of stumbling and falling down. Each new technology imitates the technology it seemingly replaced. Early television tried to be radio with pictures. I can remember how disappointed I was as a kid to see "The Lone Ranger" in black and white, crammed into a fakey studio set that looked like it would have toppled over had Silver reared.

My own imagination had painted colorful vistas to limitless horizons. Television had to figure out what people wanted that it could do better, and that turned out to be immediacy and presence. You are there, for real. Not watching from the press box — right on the field. (Maybe too real these past few weeks.)

Similarly, the early Internet tried to run ads just like its magazine and broadcast forebears. But banner ads are just as pale an imitation of the real thing as a grayscale Tonto. The trans-

plant didn't take. The medium is different. Yes, the computer we use to access the Internet has a rectangular space like a magazine page and a TV-like screen, but physical form is not what defines a medium and dictates its role.

4. Technology is the servant, not the master. What defines a medium is how people use it. What dictates the development of a technology is what people use it for.

I was present at the creation of distributed computing (we called it "time-sharing" before that had real estate implications). The technology of the late 1960s dictated that GE's engineers had to stand in line behind the accountants, punch cards in hand, to use a computer. Unacceptable, they said. So they hooked a Datatnet 10 communications controller to a GE 205 computer, got John Kemeny and his students at Dartmouth to write a user-friendly language called BASIC, and brought computing power to the people. The value of the computer as a real-time information manipulator and "what if" facilitator turned out to be far greater than its value as a souped-up computer. And so it goes, as technology critic and former GE publicist Kurt Vonnegut often said.

So where is the Internet going? How will it function as an advertising medium? Which dot.coms will rise Phoenix-like from the ashes of the financial marketplace? Don't listen to what the "experts" say; watch what people do. Look at your own behavior, and bet on it. That's the best tip you'll ever get.

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Editorial Production: Stacy Winn, manager.

Printing: Triangle Web.

Distribution: Triangle Circulation Services.

The editorials are approved by the majority of the editorial board, which is composed of the editor, editorial page editor, assistant editorial page editor and eight editorial writers. The Daily Tar Heel is published by the DTH Publishing Corp., a non-profit North Carolina corporation, Monday-Friday, according to the University calendar. Callers with questions about billing or display advertising should call 962-1163 between 8:30 a.m. and 5 p.m. Classified ads can be reached at 962-0252. Editorial questions should be directed to 962-0245.

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ISSN #01079436