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Problems and Promises

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Problems and Promises

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Editor, Interface

Because our fiscal and editorial year effectively runs June-to-June at the Berglund Center, June tends to be a time of reflection on the past year’s experience in studying the impact of the Internet. This editorial consists then, of a sort of loosely related group of ideas and issues that have arisen during the course of this reflection.

Loss of Impetus

The first issue of concern is a distinct feeling that the past year has again seen a marked loss of impetus in the development of the Internet and its many uses in the United States, during a time of rapid development abroad.

This is in part natural and inevitable. No industry has proven to be indefinitely expansive. Early leaders, as the United States has been with regard to computing and the Internet, inevitably break out ahead of others. At the time it usually seems that the development curve is infinitely up and little time is spent in asking how that momentum can be sustained.

But those who began development later often prove to have their own advantages. They may lack the talent pool or the resources that permitted the founders to break out, but they also have the advantage of copying technology rather than having to re-invent it, of purchasing talent and equipment rather than developing it, and of learning from the leaders’ errors as well as from their effective policies and decisions.

As the development curve slows then, late starters may catch up rapidly, or even, taking advantage of the learning process, or of some natural advantage they have come to recognize, to surpass the early developers. It seems to us that this is happening in some regards now to the United States.

A critical issue, we believe, is the spread of high-band width pathways and applications. The
United States continues to add bandwidth, of course, but also labors under a lack of central planning and funding which makes the process a piece-meal one rather than a national effort, as is the case in many other countries.

Too, the United States labors under limitations introduced by special interests who slow down technological development in the cause of protecting their own turf, such as is clearly the case with regard to music and film piracy as well as with extensions of some copyrights. While the U.S. looks for effective legal or software guards against piracy, other countries deploy hardware and software that may threaten intellectual property rights, but also drive further development of the Internet. Ironically, the American failure to engage in the development of such technology will only make it more difficult to combat such piracy in the future.

**Failure to Encourage Research and Development**

Another issue that has concerned us this year has been the apparent concentration upon technological R&D presumed to be of immediate application to national security as opposed to “pure” research. Federal funding has been diverted largely to the former at the expense of the latter. This can only have deleterious consequences in the long run. Moreover, it seems apparent to many, much of the funding being poured into national security concerns have been and will be largely wasted as the bureaucracy supervising this project sputters and continually reorganizes itself.

**Fraud: The Monster that Ate the Internet?**

Another major concern and one with constantly rising costs in terms of the user friendliness of the Internet, as well as in terms of the critical issues of trust and authority, is a wide variety of frauds.

Although many may well not rank it as such, it seems to us that the greatest of the many frauds being perpetuated electronically is spam. Spam relies upon fraud throughout, whether in spoofed addresses, phony products, and deceptive message headers or misattributed authorship. The daily burden of dealing with spam has come to seem to many as simply the cost of admission to the Internet.

This may prove to be the case. Yet it seems fairly clear to us that so far legal approaches show little concern for protecting the rights of the consumer. The effective federal take over of spam legislation—like the diversion of R&D funding—has produced little of apparent consequence beyond confusion and waste. Other countries are, once again, meeting with more apparent success than are we, and the United States, as represented by its government, seemingly has little interest in international solutions to this global problem, as with other areas of global concern.

We have spent considerable time and resources at the Berglund Center studying various other forms of email fraud in addition to spam, and sadly, can only confirm what all users of email intuit:
the problems are growing worse rather than better. The past year has seen numerous intrusions into commercial databases resulting in the theft of millions of addresses and credit card information. Identity theft has gone from a rarity to a common event.

We found in discussing these issues with security experts in the private sector that the international gangs involved in these crimes are far more sophisticated and patient than are the pitifully inadequate legal and enforcement authorities ranged against them. The future in this regard seems bleak, both for the victims and for those of us who must endure the daily onslaught of deceptive spam sent with criminal intent.

Summary: From Technological Issues to Policy Issues

It seems to us, in summary, that the study of the impact of the Internet began as a study of technology and of new and diverse practices and applications. But increasingly the critical issue is for improved public policy. We think just as the Internet is itself a decentralized entity presenting a common face to us as we open our browsers, good policies will have to come from the accretion of successful local practices. During the coming year we intend to continue reporting on successful local practices with renewed energy and enthusiasm. And in our own work we will attempt to model exemplary practices, and to develop new ones as well.

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