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Drinking from the Firehose

Internet Collides With Reality:

Housewife Hackers and Fuel For the Fire

Column Editor: Eleanor Cook (Appalachian State University)

I call this part of my rambling "INTERNET collides with reality" for a number of reasons. For instance, have you noticed if you read bulletin boards, that some people are ALWAYS there? Don't they have work to do? Of course we have all wondered this. Actually, many of them "do it" from home so they can hack all night if they want. Also, some of them lose interest, especially if they are active responsible individuals who have no aspirations for being complete bores. When the novelty wears off, they go back to normal life.

OK, reality has hit. One realizes there isn't time to respond to every issue that comes up. Now what? Now it's time to use the Internet efficiently. That's right: set up some distribution lists, command committees that are spread far and wide. Wow, this is neat!

Then reality hits again. I recently served on a local nomination committee. All three of us had e-mail. After convincing a colleague to accept a position on the steering committee of the organization, I sent an e-mail message to the nominations committee chair. I did my job and went on to other things. But wait! EIGHT days later I get a message back from my institution's postmaster saying the message had not been delivered. And I thought U.S. mail was slow. The system had crashed the day I sent the message, and the message did not leave my campus until four days later. It would have been nice if they had let us know about this; my message was time-sensitive. Anyway, this points out the fact the e-mail postmasters are very human and like traditional postal carriers, they can be dedicated, overworked, or just plain slack. All this instantaneous stuff is driven by people who are way too busy to worry about the importance of your individual message. That's your responsibility, not their's. [Our postmaster is a wonderful guy, don't get me wrong].

The Saga of Housewife Hackers:

I was agonizing via e-mail the other night with a colleague over a work-related issue. She was interrupted when her 10-year-old son screamed that the toilet was overflowing. Later, when she was able to sign on again, I happened to be in the room where my home computer resides, hanging wet underwear on a drying rack. (Spare bedrooms are often the site of storage boxes, Christmas wrapping paper, sewing projects, laundry racks and computers.) The computer beeped, flashing an incoming message alert across the screen. I sat down at the computer to see what was up (wet laundry on my lap). It occurred to me at that moment how absurd it all was. Overflowing toilets, wet underwear, and the Internet! It's really down to everyday life. I suppose computer enthusiasts who have been hooked on CompuServe all these years have already gone through this phase. It is a phase, right? But what's the next phase? I don't know; if anyone does, please clue me in.

Fuel for the Fire:

There are many people without access to the Internet who eagerly, even wistfully want it. This concerns me. I want them to be able to use the Internet too. A colleague of mine in a public library branch doesn't even have a fax machine, much less Internet access. Many public librarians are prominent movers and shakers, active professionally, yet totally "unplugged." We are missing these good people and they are missing out as well. (I don't mean to pick on just public librarians but they

are probably the largest group of "Have-nots" in our field right now.)

I've also been collecting "doubting Thomas" among big names. These big names are expressing doubts like mine. I'm glad I'm not alone. One very computer-literate library director in my state told me he had real concerns about using the Internet for so many things. He uses it all the time himself but is frustrated and he knows that more is not always better. We want more people to use it, but are we going to be able to accommodate this growth fast enough, especially when it is so chaotic? A prominent researcher affiliated with a major library utility said that in spite of the fact of conducting all kinds of studies, experiments, and launching electronic journals, their official position was really rather conservative. I expressed my concerns about transactional reliability and he quickly agreed. We are looking forward to NREN, but we are still motoring along on a country byway (not a super highway). In a recent meeting I attended, the national mode system was projected in a map of the US, similar to an airline route scheme. It was a mess of unintelligible scribbles. At first I couldn't tell

what I was looking at, it was so unrecognizable. The presenter chuckled, "Yep, it's a real mess, folks."

I'm going to keep plugging away at this stuff, and I bet many of you will too. However, for really important messages, a reply by a certain time should be requested or a quick phone call is in order. Of course, you may run into the problem of attempting to call someone at home, only to find the line is busy. Their modem is tying up the line. So send an e-mail message: Get off the computer! I want to call you! Absurdity newly defined. ☼