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Drinking from the Firehose / When the Super Highway Collapses

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necessary. A quality product helps sell itself. And, finally, find the best possible staff and show them your appreciation whenever possible — if not monetarily at first, at least in praise.

ATG: *Do you have any leisure or are you working all the time?*

RF: In my spare time, I try to “run a successful family.” My husband, Jacques, and I came to parenthood in our mid-thirties and we bring to the process a different perspective than younger couples and a serious commitment to succeed as mother and father of two lively, growing boys.

Ed note: Well, there is a little something about the highly energetic (not to mention innovative) Raissa Fomerand. What a delightful librarian! Look for her at the next ALA and, who knows, maybe we will get her to come to a Charleston Conference! — KS

Drinking from the Firehose

When the Super Highway Collapses — Thoughts About Earthquakes and the Internet, Or, Is the Internet Out of Control?
by **Eleanor I. Cook** (Serials Librarian, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608 COOKEI@CONRAD.APPSTATE.EDU)

I cannot access the Internet tonight. Our campus computer cluster is being tapped out by students, faculty and other legitimate users, all attempting to dial in at the same time. The computer center is going to install more ports, telephone lines and/or whatever else it takes to let us all successfully knock on the door and be allowed inside. I am relieved that they are taking steps to alleviate the problem, but how soon will it become a critical mass situation again? Maybe not for awhile, at least on this campus, but I am thinking big picture here.

In fall semester 1993 all the students at my institution were assigned e-mail accounts. Doubtless not all of them will use their accounts; but the fact that an additional 12,000 human beings now have the ability to reach the campus computer — well, that's a pretty amazing jump in use. No wonder I cannot get through.

We're spoiled. Many of us have been using the “net” either via BITNET or INTERNET now for a couple of years and we like it just the way it is. It's a folksy community. We can talk to our friends and colleagues in a way that's like having an 800 number. Sure, somebody out there is paying the bill, but it isn't our concern. But, it won't be long I'm afraid and we'll be pining away for the “good ol' days”

Remember never getting a busy signal when you dialed in?

Remember when no one cared how much stuff you left in your account? Remember when listservs and bulletin boards were novelties and you could subscribe to as many as you wanted to and keep up with all of them?

Remember when you could name all the electronic journals that existed?

Lately, it seems that the Internet is out of control; it's becoming overwhelming and disorganized. Everybody has a Gopher, but each one is arranged differently and it's hard to know where to look for information. (The Internet needs cataloging, but that's another column.) Everybody wants in on the Internet. Before

“... who owns the Internet anyway?”

we know it, there will be advertisements for Campbell's Soup and McDonald's on the Internet. I guess that's the American way; if something is good, it catches on and eventually it is spoiled by becoming TOO much of a good thing.

And that's the way we're headed if Vice President Gore had his way. Looks great on paper, Al, but what will the national information superhighway really be like? It's already mind-boggling as it is, and we'll probably have ourselves an all-American traffic jam before long.

Also, the Internet is becoming somewhat dangerous. Gangs of hackers are committing electronic-style drive-by shootings. University computer centers are sitting ducks if they don't keep the moat full of alligators and the drawbridge up. Such security concerns make it harder for those not affiliated with academic centers to gain access legitimately. Several recent articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2/9/94 and 2/16/94) have discussed security problems at universities and the impact these attacks have had on access to the Internet.

How many people do you know who think nothing of leaving their offices open, computer logged in, while they go off to a meeting for a couple of hours? How about those who leave passwords on sticky notes next to work stations, or let coworkers use their accounts? Not only is this laziness, it's irresponsibility. It's these kind of habits that, though innocent enough in themselves, are invitations to major security breeches. If you lock the door behind you when you leave your home in the morning or when you retire for the evening, then you ought to have enough sense to do likewise with your computer account. It just doesn't SEEM like a big deal.

The fact that many of us do not directly feel the cost of the electronic resources to which we have such luxurious access may be part of the problem. The Internet is NOT FREE. It really bugs me when people say that it is. People wouldn't walk away and leave their accounts wide open if the meter was running, so to speak. We all dread the day when transactional billing is instituted on our mail accounts; look what it's done to our OCLC bills. Small institutions and businesses often do not have access because of the high cost of wiring their buildings or offices or because they are not close to a node willing to let them in for a reasonable fee.

This all leads to the question: who owns the Internet anyway? We all do and no one group does. An analogy to the highway system addresses this question as well as any. You own your driveway, the city or county owns the road you live on, the county or state owns the main road out of town, and the federal government owns the interstate highway. Different organizations share in the upkeep of these various roads and likewise

is the case with the electronic highway system on which we have grown so dependent. It will be important as the Internet matures to be able to identify these paths and make sure they work together harmoniously and consistently. Right now there are a few cow paths among the super highways.

Increased dependence on electronic communications has created a need for

"The Internet needs cataloging . . ."

the Internet to be easier to use. The Internet is changing faster than we can even discuss it. The finding tools I have mentioned in earlier columns just this past year are already becoming commonplace, even out-dated. The latest tool, called Mosaic, is still new to me and I cannot explain it here, but the January/February 1994 issue of *EDUCOM Review* features an excellent description.

Yes, the Internet's popularity is gaining strength. While attending the Ameri-

can Library Association's midwinter conference in Los Angeles, I was amazed to see an advertisement for *Wired* magazine on the side of a city bus!

Still, we're vulnerable. Last week a tree fell on a telephone line and knocked out our county's long distance and 911 service. We were cut off from the outside world for most of the day. No long distance phone calls, fax, e-mail, and no way to let anyone know why they couldn't get through to us. I can imagine how the folks in Los Angeles felt when they learned that their major freeways had collapsed. It's unnerving to say the least.

The Internet's metamorphosis will continue, hopefully in a positive direction. In just a few years the issues we are concerned about today will be completely eclipsed by new concerns. Will librarians still be around, participating in whatever is the latest wave of "info-sharing?" Perhaps we'll evolve into "cybrarians!" ☞

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