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Drinking from the Firehose

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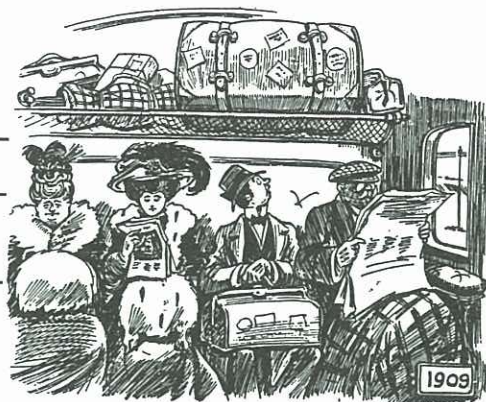
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Drinking From the Firehose

Is the Internet Going to Collapse Under Its Own Weight?

By **Eleanor I. Cook** (Serials Specialist, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608) <cookei@appstate.edu>



There is a series of articles in the latest *Internet World* (October, 1996) about whether or not the Internet is going to give in to the mad rush of activity straining its bandwidth. Super highway gridlock, as it were.

On my own tiny piece of the pavement, I've been wondering about this on a personal level. Everybody wants to be on the Internet now. I cannot keep up with my email, with the list I moderate, with new developments and new sites on the World Wide Web, not to mention the good old U.S. snail mail and professional (print) reading. This is a common lament for many of us, I suppose. I suspect the computer geeks and gurus have simply given up monitoring *any* listserves or bulletin boards except perhaps a chosen few. Some people manage by having multiple accounts to handle different types of communication traffic. The privileged have "unlisted" email addresses. And so it goes.

This is where some of us start to long for the "good old days." Of course, I hardly qualify as an old-timer in this realm, but I suppose I might be considered a middle-aged net user for sake of argument. In the same issue of *Internet World* referred to above, there was an announcement of a list devoted to the history of the Internet. (To subscribe, send to: listserv@cpsr.org a message that says: subscribe cpsr-history Your Name) The list owner is **David Bennahum**, self-appointed historian of the Internet. (*Internet World*, October 1996, p.28)

That got me to reminiscing. The first time I heard of electronic mail was around 1980. I was working as a library assistant at the

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and working on my MLS. A friend of mine who worked at the computer center on that campus rescued an ailing ADDS terminal that was being sent to state surplus or the trash heap and resuscitated it at home. Because he was one of those savvy, self-taught computer whizzes, he managed to hook it up to his university account and was able to send and receive email from his apartment. He showed off this marvel to his less technologically sophisticated friends and we were impressed, but also puzzled. Why would you want to type little messages to people on a computer screen? Just call the guy, right? The answer was, well, because, you CAN. Having enough exposure to technology from my experiences with using OCLC and other computer-related projects in my library science program (This was before word processing, even), I knew better than to question him further.

Computers were the wave of the future. So what if it took thousands of hours of programming to produce printed catalog cards that fast typists could whip out in minutes. This was progress!

My next exposure to email, in its more modern form, was at **North Carolina State University**. By the mid-80's lots of people on university campuses knew about email, though mostly only techies were using it. It hardly seemed worth the trouble to type through the laborious, clunky login procedures to get to the campus mainframe, plus if you succeeded, to whom would you send a message? However, by 1989 all that changed. We were being encouraged to learn to use email, both internally and to the outside world. Things developed very quickly. In 1990, when I moved to **Appalachian State University**, setting up my email account was almost as important as signing up for health insurance. In those days, traffic conditions were still at a small town pace in comparison to today.

So let me digress to the topic of small town traffic. In Boone, as in other small towns, we have occasional, predictable, isolated and intensely focused types of traffic problems. Like when a truck carrying logs or some other delightful substance (like lacquer, which happened recently), spills all over the highway and blocks traffic for hours or days. Or an annual event, such as the Highland Games at Grandfather Mountain or the Gospel Sing at the county fairgrounds backs traffic up on a major highway from one end of town to the Tennessee border. These are traffic jams, all right, but the kind you can circumvent if you know enough short cuts. The Internet is like that too. It's amazingly flexible and cooperative in its ability to cope with annoying logjams along the way. But what happens when mega-traffic, like that found in metropolitan Washington, D.C., New York City, etc. comes to the Internet? There are no shortcuts, and if there are, they aren't short. It reminds me of when I used to commute between Chapel Hill and Raleigh before the interstate highway there was completed and my car pool partner and I knew every back road in Durham county. It still took us an hour to get home and we often went 15 miles out of our way, but at least we were *moving*.

There is divergence of opinion about whether the Internet will experience a major crash. I suspect there will be some scares. Any time there is a natural disaster, for instance, there is major down time in a given region. We just suffered from Hurricane Fran, the biggest Hurricane in our state since 1954's Hurricane Hazel. Worse than Hugo, which *ATG* readers know decimated Charleston in 1989. But the first thing to come up in times of disaster is the

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And They Were There
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September 16, 1996: "ABA last week sold its remaining 51 percent equity in the ABA Convention and Trade Exhibit to Association Exposition and Services which had purchased a 49 percent interest in the event in 1993." AE & S, a division of Reed Exhibition Companies said it will rename the event **Book Expo America**. The story goes on with more Madison Avenue hype, but I am wondering how the old-time members will take to this renaming of a nearly hundred-year-old institution. As a minor member of ABA, I'm wondering how the membership (5,000 plus) would have voted had they been polled. Kinda risky, I'd say, with several large publishers and hundreds of bookstore owners reporting better results, at much lower costs, with the regional book-sellers associations, of which there are nine by my count. 

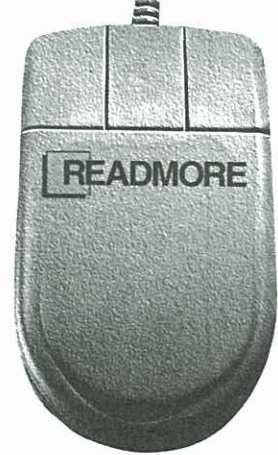
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Internet. UNC-Chapel Hill even has a Web page with pictures of the devastation on campus. (<http://sunsite.unc.edu/maggot/fran/>) Unfortunately, the Web site is so heavily graphic that the images choke on a standard Web browser. What a perfect example of the mixed state of this technology.

If the Internet does crash, I will write about it here, safe in the pages of a printed source. But if it does, I guess I will have to send Katina my copy via fax or U.S. mail! 

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