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Drinking From the Firehose

From Sex to Milk and Cookies: Pitfalls of Searching the World Wide Web

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It's been awhile since I've rambled in this space. I've been saving up my energy to talk about various developments happening on the World Wide Web. As usual, the changes are occurring at a rapid pace and as usual, I barely know what I am talking about as I try to keep up with the trends.

First, let me say a few words about sex on the Web. I'll not be cutesy or coy or take a self-righteous approach; I'd prefer to strike a balance with this sensitive issue. With so much publicity about government efforts to limit what can be published online and the development of filtering devices and the like, I wondered what all the fuss was about. So one Saturday morning I sat down in front of my home computer and decided to find out for myself.

I did something very simple — so simple a small child could do it. I went to Yahoo! and typed the word "sex" in the subject line. The responses were varied and some sites were not lurid at all. From this simple exploration, I discovered that there is definitely hard core, explicit material of a sexual nature on the World Wide Web. Since I was not interested in giving out my name and email address to any of the sites, I did not go past the opening screens. However a number of these initial screens were fairly explicit and could be perplexing or frightening to children. The opening screen for "Denise's Dildos" was, for example, an oddly-angled pose of a woman doing something that seemed rather impossible. To get to the really steamy scenes, most sites ask for verification that you are an adult and to register officially with the site. A smart kid could do this, giving mom or dad's information with ease.

So, what should parents do about this? It would seem that it's best to be up front with children about responsible use of the Web, just as one would be about other printed material and communication devices (TV, video, etc.). Every kid has found a copy of *Playboy* or other sexually explicit reading/viewing matter of some kind in his or her life. Finding sexually explicit materials on the Web may seem easier, but that depends on how much supervision is available, both at home and at school, or at the library, for that matter. As children we used to play with the telephone — something that is considered not only rude but unlawful. Calling up someone listed in the phone book as Martha Washington and asking for George, giggling and hanging up seemed perfectly hilarious to us as children, but it was needless harassment. There are, of course, those 900 numbers to deal with also. Children

must learn not to goof around with the phone, not to play with matches, and not to peek at adult stuff on the Web. But they will do all these things and in order for them not to come to harm, parents and caretakers must provide supervision, guidance and support as much as possible. Enough said.

So, after my foray into the seamier side of the Web, a few days later it was time for a Netscape upgrade. My local computer - whiz co-worker who makes house calls came over to install the new version and showed me something I didn't know about. Parents should know about this if their kids are cruising the Web. When you visit a site, that site stays resident on your machine for some period of time, a period which can be set by you. It's called a history file or a cache. Finding it on your computer (especially if you have Windows'95) is not so easy, but it is there. If you cannot find it, get a computer person to help you, and then write down

See Back Talk, this issue, pg. 90, for a related discussion.

how you got there. I found it the other day but I can't remember how I did it! Anyway, as my friend was showing me how to do this, there they were, Denise and all the others! Was I embarrassed — but I explained to him I was writing an article about sex on the Internet and of course he chuckled and said "Oh sure!" Then we emptied that cache, straight-away! Remember that the folks who maintain the library's computers (including the one in your office) can find your cache and will know if you are goofing off or really working when you explore the Web!

Another thing that happens when you visit Web sites, is that the site you just visited can obtain information about you when you arrive, and then sometimes they attach "cookies" to a text file "cookies.txt" to your end of the connection. Cookies allow Web sites to then send you more messages about their products or services. I witnessed this recently when a new computer was installed in our area and I was showing a co-worker how to use *AcqWeb*. As an example, she gave me the author, title and publisher of a book her dad was interested in reading. We went to the publisher's home page, looked up the book and found the bibliographic and ordering information about it. At that point we could have even ordered the book, but we didn't. She just wanted to know how much it cost and whether it was available in paperback. Two days later she received an

unsolicited email message from this publisher promoting another book on a similar subject. Instead of finding this information useful, my co-worker was outraged. To her way of thinking, the last thing she wants is such intrusions. Fortunately, "preferences" in your browser (Netscape, etc.) can be set so that cookies cannot be attached.

Another advance in customizing Internet service is called "push" technology. This is the Internet coming to you rather than you going out to search for what you're looking for. Some people predict this to be the wave of the future, but I am not so sure. Of course maybe I am just old-fashioned. I have never been thrilled when marketers start guessing what I will buy next based on what I just bought recently. In fact I thoroughly despise these second-guessing games. It's just another method to fill up my account with cyber junk mail! However, you can utilize push technology to filter in what you want to know about without having to wade through information not important to you. It is like being able to leave out sections of the newspaper before you buy the whole thing. A news service like PointCast does this for you. There are a number of other services like BackWeb and Marimba that utilize push technology and are available now. Recent issues of *Wired Magazine*, *Internet World* and others feature articles on push technology.¹

I am perfectly content for now, exploring on my own. For example, I was recently able to plan all the places I am going to stay on my vacation using a couple of Web sites for Bed and Breakfast accommodations. Most of the major airlines now offer special deals over the Web. You can do almost anything you can think of using the Web, although there are still plenty of holes in the net, if you'll excuse the pun. 🐿

Endnote and Selected Sources

- ¹Andrews, Whit. "Planning for Push: How to Seize Control of the Technology That's Sweeping the Web." *Internet World*, vol.8, no.5, May 1997, pp.44-52.
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