

## The World Still Wonders What to Make of the Internet

Marlene Miller

*Editor's note:* John Miller and Marlene Miller to our columnist roster are the primary developers of CIE (Computer Information Exchange) and the ChiroLink Intranet System. Prior to her joining ChiroLink, Marlene Miller enjoyed a 17-year career as an education program developer and administrator. She writes that today her favorite work is that of "information specialist." She and the staff of ChiroLink expertly search, retrieve, and organize information for clients and ChiroLink members.

Since joining the faculty of Palmer College of Chiropractic in 1962, Dr. John Miller is a chiropractic activist. He has been involved in the inclusion of chiropractic in Medicare; the development of the Council on Chiropractic Education (CCE) and the Association of Chiropractic Colleges (ACC). He was president of Palmer College of Chiropractic West (1980-1991), the Association of Chiropractic Colleges (1987-1990), and the Council on Chiropractic Education (1990-1992). In 1991 Dr. Miller left chiropractic education to direct interest and energies towards telecommunications. During that year, the Millers initiated the development of CIE, and in 1992 CIE brought the ChiroLink system online.

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There's a lot of power in this 'net thing, but we keep circling, wondering how to approach it, how it will affect us, and what will happen when we start working with it in earnest.

One of the fundamental barriers to Internet insight is that no one has had the epiphany of how the darned thing compares to anything we're familiar with. Some say the Internet's sort of like a prairie dog town in that there are dozens of paths leading off in all directions, and you can never see around the upcoming curve. Some compare it to a 19th-century American land rush where everyone races to claim a piece, then realizes they own a chunk of desert that nobody will visit until some rich fellow builds a railroad or town nearby. Others say it's like public access television in that virtually anybody can have a voice on it, but no one is listening to most of it. The best analogy, for now, is probably some amalgamation of all these and more.<sup>1</sup>

Is the 'Net Demanding a "New" Definition of Work?

Regardless of how perplexed (this) seasoned online user may be by the 'net's nature, it is probably minor compared to the angst of the already busy practicing chiropractor who contemplates whether to take the office/clinic to "cyberspace" (e.g., investing precious time and money on Internet marketing).

By this time in Web history, possibly several companies have pressed you to consider taking your office to an online presence (via your own Web site, Home Page, and/or online directory listing).

From my office of plexiglass, allow me to cast a couple stones. Considering that only 14% of American households use the Internet,<sup>2</sup> and the doctor cannot know how many of these online

households are within a 25-mile radius, it seems to me the promotion of one's Web site on business cards, stationery and yellow page ads is (in reality) just a hedging against the day when the greater public may actually understand and care about those funny "http://" things, and subsequently "look for" a chiropractor on the Internet.

Setting aside the pros and cons of Internet marketing, I find much more concern that many still struggle with the other (and larger) 'net idea: That of a communication and information vehicle. Many have not yet decided whether they want, need (or even like) this often overwhelming tide of information pouring through their computer.

Ambivalence is typical of even the ardent online user. There are days of slow data transmission, disconnections, or badly organized Web sites; frustrations of having to dig through piles of data to find only one small piece of intelligence. Then on another day, the doctor experiences a fast, uncomplicated search and retrieval of valuable research data necessary for an issue with a third-party carrier, and thinks: "This is the 'new' way to work! I've discovered a global information clearinghouse."

Is the 'Net a Threat to Our Privacy?

Many of us circle the 'net trying to decide whether we should fear it. Does the vast storehouse of information online mean loss of privacy? And even if we choose to never use the Internet, is it using us?

Consider the two forces currently at work: The growing number of computers connecting to the Internet and the increasing amount of information being stored digitally (information about each one of us).

An incident involving Yahoo!, a popular Web search tool, illustrates one of the more concerning implications of our digitized information age. Last spring, Yahoo! planned to launch an online phone book, and contracted an agreement with Database America, a New Jersey marketing firm. Database America cobbled together its 170 million names from scores of magazine subscription lists, product warranty cards, credit reports, and other lists acquired over time from other companies. Consumers have grown to realize the buying and selling of our names is a profitable practice in which many mail-order and marketing firms engage to find new customers.

Yahoo!'s plans to make the listings available on the Internet drew fire when people began to realize the information went beyond what we see in the phone book. Judges, law enforcement officials, undercover police officers, FBI agents, and others with a critical interest in keeping their addresses and phone numbers out of the public sphere suddenly found their personal information on display. Following inquiries from newspaper reporters, Yahoo! pulled the plug on the controversy by agreeing to remove names not listed in existing white pages.

Evan Hendricks, editor and publisher of the Washington, D.C. newsletter, Privacy Times, said Yahoo! did the right thing in the end, but the fact that the company did not delete the names without some prodding is troublesome. "I was just astounded it didn't cross their minds beforehand," Hendricks said. "However, no law specifically prevents similar public posting by other 'Yahoos!'. In the event of a related harassment or tragedy, such sites might be subject to liability, but it would take a tort case and a creative lawyer."

Hendricks advocates the creation of federal law protecting names and addresses from being used for unrelated purposes. With such a law, people would have legal recourse if filling out a magazine subscription card, or purchasing a product online, leads to odd junk mail or the discovery of one's

phone number and personal information plastered across the Internet. Hendricks calls the idea a "consistent purposes test."

Is the 'Net Unleashing a Power We Can't Handle?

"An individual without information cannot take responsibility; an individual who is given information cannot help but take responsibility."<sup>3</sup>

At the time of this writing, approximately 436 Internet search engines, directories, and search services troll the data waters of the 'net, looking for keywords of interest to millions of its users. These online utilities perform a valuable service by making more information available to more people. We simply need to keep in mind that in a true information age, some of the data is bound to be about us -- neatly indexed by keyword.

Never in the history of humanity have we had a tool that can more effectively unleash the power of information than this 'net thing! I believe we can handle it. But meanwhile, we may be wise to continue to "circle." (Our forefathers found it effective.)

### *References*

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