FROM THE EDITOR

The Internet and Information Overload

by Richard F. Walters

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As often happens, I am writing this editorial on a plane headed back from the MTA office, full of ideas about the issue in which these comments will appear and enthusiastic about the content of this issue, while at the same time mindful of some basic issues raised by this content. Looking at the fascinating collection of Internet-related materials presented in this informative issue of *M Computing*, I can't help but think about some issues that have nagged me for a number of months, long before the articles in this issue came into being. Let me begin with a few facts that have caused me to reflect deeply on the state of information in today's society.

The consequences of advances in computer technology have been mind-boggling, even to the very experts who have fed these advances. We now think casually of gigabyte storage capacities on personal computers (even laptops!), when a few years back (i.e., 1975, when I built my first IMSAI microcomputer), the idea of a "high density" disk (floppy, of course) with 360K bytes of storage was a breakthrough. The growth in volume (not necessarily quality) of information available through the World Wide Web and other sources is progressing at a rate estimated at 20% per month—a rate that staggers the imagination. We all know these facts, but sometimes we fail to reflect on their implications. Let me cite a couple of examples.

As a result of the breadth and volume of "stuff" (I can't bring myself to use the term information) on the Web, a new, bona fide clinical syndrome has emerged: I'll use the term Compulsive Internet Surfing Syndrome (I'm not sure if a more accurate clinical term yet exists). Cases have been reported in the medical literature of individuals so addicted to "surfing" on the net that they will spend 16-18 hours a day doing nothing else, to the detriment of their careers, social life, and physical health. One solution commonly prescribed is to take away their computers, so that they will be forced to readjust to the "real world."

Let me cite a more personal example. I receive (in some cases without subscribing) perhaps as many as 20 periodicals at the office and ten or so at home. I read a great deal (not just email), and I have a great many interests. I recently read a disturbing statistic, the exact details did not stay with me, but to the effect that only some 5% of technical papers are read at all! What disturbed me even more was to realize that I read even less than 5% of the magazine-type material that comes across my desk. My practice is to look at the cover, put it in a holding area in my office (box, bin, barrel... depending on how rapidly it is accumulating before I move it along), and then, when I have time or the office is no longer habitable, I take a push cart of literature to my lab, where I sort it out, sometimes retrieving something I really should read "later." There is no way I get to even 5% of the articles in those journals and magazines.

I am not unusual in this respect, as supported by the previous statistic. Further, I think we have all been forced to develop protective measures to shield us from

information overload. For instance, I rarely watch television. I read sparingly from daily papers, preferring to spend a little more time with the Sunday editorials. And I almost never surf the Internet. I am fortunate in having some very dedicated students who somehow find time to check out all those Internet sources, and they are kind enough to send me URLs (Universal Resource Locators: see some of the articles in this issue!) when they think I would be interested. I do check out many of these suggestions from my students, enough to know that there is a great deal of good stuff out there. Email points me to other good sources, such as some newsgroups (like comp.lang.mumps). My first point then, is that although I manage to avoid a lot of information, I also manage to see a great deal over the spread of a few weeks.

My second point is raised by the verb "avoid" that crept into the previous sentence. One frequently practiced self-protective measure is "Avoidism." When I gave the only lecture on computers in medicine that our first medical student class at Davis would ever hear as a part of their medical education, the only question asked was by a bright, thoughtful student who wanted to know which specialty in medicine was the least likely to be affected by computers over the next 30 years. The year was 1970, and I responded, "well, maybe surgery." "Right," he said, "I'll be a surgeon." I was wrong, as we now know, but the point here is that this was a classical example of avoidism.

What are your protective mechanisms? Quills, a thick tortoise shell home, head in the sand? A decision never to have a computer at home? A conscious decision to stay away from email and the Internet and the World Wide Web? Will these methods work? Will you be able to help the M community spread its word without knowing at least a little more about these things? I doubt it. I think that, if you look around, you will see that the word about M is spreading most rapidly through and because of Internet and the Web. We are doing well in getting the word out there, but we could to a great deal better if more M-sters would join the fray, learn a little about HTML, market their products and their ideas on the Web, and incidentally, learn a little more about the competition as they improve their own products and ideas.

The MTA office I just left has experienced some significant downsizing, and they are a little disheartened by the loss of valued staff associates and, yes, valued MTA members who did not renew their memberships this year. Yet, when I left the office a few hours ago, I sensed a rebirth of enthusiasm for the potential that a revised MTA home page (generously designed and configured by Jim Rooney of Oleen Associates) will give them. The possibilities, they realize, are endless. What it takes is for them, and you, to become familiar with these tools and resources, so they can turn them to the advantage of the M community.

My final words on this subject, then, are: don't linger! Learn about the Web. Set up your own home page. Find out just enough about HTML to develop a few links from your home page to some of the many resources out there that can help you present your message. You'll find that it won't require much time, the rewards will be substantial, and you will be able to develop appropriate protective mechanisms to avoid overload while still being a part of the information explosion that characterizes our society. Good luck, and may this issue of *M Computing* help point the way for you!

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