

International Herald Tribune: Keep the Web Wordly and Wide

Contributed by Matt
Thursday, 11 December 2003
Last Updated Monday, 11 June 2007

This piece originally appeared in the International Herald Tribune, December 11, 2003. Keep the Web Worldly and Wide
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CAMBRIDGE, Massachusetts -- The World Wide Web as we know it was born 10 years ago last month when a handful of students at the University of Illinois released a tiny piece of software called the Mosaic browser. Later renamed Netscape, it made the Internet a colorful and inviting medium that anyone could navigate.

Millions soon flocked online, and Netscape's public stock listing two years later ushered in the dot-com boom.

Today 600 million people around the world use the Web, digital traffic doubles each year and the most common language online will soon be Chinese.

This week, nations from around the world (more than 50 represented by heads of state) are meeting in Geneva to discuss how to govern the information society globally. Yet remembering the Web's roots is more important than ever: Its success is due to the fact that it initially flew below the radar of governments and large corporations.

But now that the Web is too important to ignore, its revolutionary openness is under threat. As both governments and businesses try to tame the Web, it risks suffocating in their embrace.

In the Web's early years, many claimed it was beyond the reach of geographically-limited nations. Today, of course, online crime is routinely prosecuted, while electronic commerce is regulated and taxed. More ominously, many governments such as China and Saudi Arabia routinely censor the Web, and even U.S. law mandates the use of filtering software in public libraries.

A French court in 2000 ordered Yahoo to remove content featuring Nazi memorabilia that, although outlawed in France, is legal in the United States where Yahoo is based. Meanwhile, a plethora of developing nations ban Internet-based phone calls to protect their state-run telephone companies, even though this holds back their own economic development.

If governments pose one set of challenges for a free-flowing Web, unbridled commercialization presents another. A host of dubious patents concerning Web technology now threaten to stifle online innovation and interoperability.

For instance, while Microsoft is criticized for crushing Netscape in the "browser wars" of the mid-1990's, the company itself is under siege by businesses that claim important parts of the Web's technical standards as their own.

In August, a U.S. court fined Microsoft \$521 million for infringing on patents covering basic Web technology - a verdict so questionable that in November the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office took the rare step of re-examining the original patent award.

One can sympathize with the motivations to rejigger the Web. Countries want an Internet that is easily regulated, scrutinized and taxed. Companies want one that is sanitized, commercialized and family-friendly.

A decade ago, computer viruses were a novelty, spam was for sandwiches and online privacy was a non-issue. Yet as we try to remedy these problems, we must not destroy the unique openness that has made the Web so successful.

This is because the principle behind the Web is the free flow of information; the network lets anyone connect to anyone else seamlessly - which, despite its vulnerability to abuse, is inherently democratic and empowering.

The alternative is a world where governments and companies close their digital borders, harming the Web's smooth interoperability. For instance, one increasingly popular technique to curtail spam is software that only permits e-mail from people already in one's address book - thus blocking innocent communication among friends-of-friends.

More troubling, a number of countries, including China, India and Brazil, are pushing for the United Nations to take control of the underlying infrastructure that makes the Internet work - an issue to be hotly debated at the UN's World Summit on the Information Society this week in Geneva. Proponents justify this under the banner of internationalism, yet it risks subjecting the global medium to the whims of parochial (and at times repressive) interests. Ultimately, the Web might end up less wide and less worldly.

The group of college students who released Mosaic 10 ten years ago were blessed with a simpler set of concerns. We should be thankful to those who provided us with such an incredible technology. But governments and industry worldwide must guard against sacrificing the Web's openness as the network matures. In the decade to come, we should remember that the proper stewardship of a technology is as important as its invention.

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