

Web Watcher



By Glenn Fleishman

Eternal September

Noise is a constant problem in information transmission. Information science, in fact, was created to solve the problem of noise (random fluctuation) seeping into signal (coherent information). When people talk about signal-to-noise ratio (the quality of transmission), or even when they folksily refer to separating the wheat from the chaff, they're talking about noise.

And guess what the Internet is: one giant noisemaker, with millions of little transmitters constantly emitting an indecipherable amount of information. Everyone has relatively equal say through electronic mail, newsgroups, Web-based discussion boards, Internet Relay Chat, and other forums. And most of what's being said is—well, chaff.

Back in the good old days, when there were only a few hundred thousand folks on the Internet, mailing lists and newsgroups were pretty darn useful and controllable. I moderated an early list called DTP-L back at Yale University in 1991. When it was at its peak, we had about 600 people from around the world discussing PageMaker and QuarkXPress. And sharing lots of useful information on the side.

The same was true of Usenet newsgroups (Usenet's name comes from the now-obscure source "UNIX User Network"). Since newsgroups were organized into small subtopics like comp.sys.mac ("computers, systems, Macintosh"), you could have threaded, topic-based discussions with thousands of people, all of whom were pretty well-informed. They were all out on the edge, all early adopters of their day, so they tended to know a lot about the technology and ideas they discussed. There were also many academic participants, whose voices lent more authority to discussions of politics, economics, and science.

But as the Internet became more commercial, the noise factor increased. Be-

cause so many new users were constantly coming online, the Net's history and culture began to erode. New users tended to do things like post unnecessary greetings to newsgroups ("HI, I'M NEW! WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT! I LIVE IN CONNECTICUT! ;-) :) !!!"). This didn't make discussions any clearer.

Then came a moment that anyone who was living on the Internet at the time recalls. It was that day in the fall of 1994 when America Online opened its two-way gateway to newsgroups, thus enabling its millions of members to post messages.

It used to be that, every September, when freshpeople came to college campuses and got their new computer accounts, a burst of newbie (new user) activity would light up the newsgroups. A friend of mine says that, when AOL opened up two-way newsgroup access, it became "eternal September."

It's a good description of the Net. Every day, so many new users flood the system that there's no practical way to increase the signal strength, either through education or by posing barriers to entry. Also, the sheer numbers of users weigh down discussions. The Mac used to be discussed just in comp.sys.mac, until the group started to receive too many posts per day and was split into three or four groups. There are now so many groups, and so many thousands of posts per day that contain little or no new information or queries, that the groups are essentially unusable for anyone but a new user with a heavy information habit or someone new to a particular subject.

I don't mean to take an elitist or "veteran's" view. But the fact is that the organizational structure that allows anyone to post, and that keeps all information at essentially the same level, has been overtaxed and has collapsed, even though millions of people still use it.

This is a contradiction, of course, but so

is living in New York City. The pipes may burst, the streets may clog, the water may occasionally turn yellow—but it's still the greatest city in the world.

The reason for the collapse is that, with all the advances in browser technology and Internet tools, newsgroups have remained pretty much the same as they were when they were introduced several years ago. A radically new structure has to emerge that preserves the notion of structured, threaded discussion—discussion in which subsequent replies to topics can branch into subtopics and yet be followed. Some Web tools have tried to simulate this online, but one company that *was* building a better mousetrap (net.Genesis, with its net.Thread product) abandoned development after a year or so.

One proposal I've heard is to abandon all categorization of discussion and have newsgroup participants use tools like Alta Vista to customize their own preferences. You would post into a massive pool, and threads would be constructed based on who you had replied to, keywords you had set, and indexes of the words in your post. Everyone's newsgroup would be different, although some sets of constructs would probably come preassembled.

The larger answer, of course, is maturity of the medium. Everyone talks about the Net's phenomenal growth, but nothing can grow a constant percentage per month indefinitely. Eventually, growth will taper off as the vast majority of people who are going to get onto the Net do get on.

Once we reach some kind of critical maturity mass, with a large number of people who have used the medium for a year or more, I hope we can settle into an eternal late fall, or even an eternal March. ▀

Glenn Fleishman is catalog manager at Amazon.com, an online bookstore with more than a million titles. He may be reached at glennf@amazon.com.