

Motorcycles, Advocacy and the Internet - Part 1

Peachesz Zukowski ©1999

Insights into the potential and actual effects of the computer technology and the Internet on motorcycling

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Editor's note: In the following article, website addresses are enclosed in carats; for example <www.mrf.org>. All characters enclosed within the carats are required for your browser to find the site described.

BTW, IMHO! - a secret code to the uninitiated.
(By The Way, In My Humble Opinion)

The computer age created a language, an informational insurrection seeping into every part of culture. At <www.whatever.com>, Web addresses direct users to any topic, individual, business, organization, or information desired. "You have mail!" is the rallying cry of a revolution that is influencing our lives and the lifestyle of motorcycling.

The Wall Street Journal reports that the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office has issued more than 17,000 software patents alone. Technology is here to stay. IDG.net reveals, "Global Internet users will soar to 147 million — more than the population of Japan; while World Wide Web portal sites follow the consolidation trend, Internet stocks take a 'dramatic' correction and PC prices continue to fall, according to 1999 predictions from International Data Corp." *(1.) What does it mean? Large conglomerates are forming, computers will be available to everyone, and our world will never be the same again. We had better adapt.

The Internet utilizes data, files, text, programs, pictures, video and sound. Using email, news groups, file transfer protocol, IRC, and the Web, communication is progressing exponentially. Steve Zimmer, Motorcycle Riders Founda-

tion Vice President of Government Relations, spoke of the impact of computer technology on motorcyclists in an email interview. "It is comparable to the impact the printing press had on the written word. The ability to instantly transmit information to the membership has changed the face of organizational communication. Distributing press releases and action alerts to thousands of people, a task that once took hours and days, can now be done within minutes." From the Hell's Angels to the Christian Motorcyclists, clubs and organizations have the technology to provide every type of service to their memberships.

E-mail is replacing phone, fax, and mail, due to its simplicity and cost effectiveness. Messages can be checked when convenient, and deliver information, images, audio, and video that can be saved, reused, or further processed for presentation, proposals, or reports. E-mail is a tool for the traveling motorcyclist. Get a free web based e-mail address from <www.hotmail.com> or <www.yahoo.com>. With the address you can send or receive e-mail from any location. No need to take a computer on the scooter, since cyber-cafes, libraries, copy centers, and major hotels worldwide offer Internet access free or for a small fee.

A "list" is a compilation of information sent via automated email to individual subscribers. Mailing list mayhem is often encountered by new users. Users, failing to realize it's a network distribution mailing list, hit the reply button assuming they are responding to a single individual. If you wish to respond to the author of a message on a list, change the address on the outgoing message to the individual's email address. If you don't, you'll end up sharing your private thoughts with all the subscribers on the list.

Steve Zimmer commented, "Being a part of this information explosion brings with it certain responsibilities. The recipients on the lists are charged with the responsibility to ensure the information is accurate by checking other sources.

Don't rely on just one source for all your information, verify the information. Those managing the lists are charged with the same responsibility of double checking to make sure of the accuracy of everything they put out, either original material or information being passed on. The consequences of passing on inaccurate information are multiplied ten times ten due to the speed of distribution."

Over 15,000 news groups exist on the Usenet portion of the Internet. Unique discussion on virtually any topic can be found. A question, announcement, or comment is posted and then answered by news group readers. By subscribing to <alt.motorcycles>, <alt.motorcycles.harley>, <alt.motorcycles.mrf>, and other related news groups- you can enter into discussions with riders worldwide. Be smart, lurk for a while. Sit in silently, get the hang of the conversations. Look up the FAQ's (frequently asked questions) and learn the rules. Post when comfortable, remembering politeness counts.

Allowing real time chats, Inter Relay Chat (IRC) is the modern day text equivalent of a party line. The special IRC software requires an Internet connection, an IRC server and an IRC channel. Hundreds of servers such as Efnets, Undernet, and Dalnet offer thousands of channels, each with its own topic. By timed arrangement, participants can "talk" internationally. Electronic conferences can be held using this method. AOL Instant Messenger, a free program, is for non-AOL users to chat real time with each other and AOL users. ICQ, another a free real-time message program, is considered one of the best for chats. Motorcyclists all over the word network and form friendships utilizing chats.

Browsers such as Microsoft Explorer or Netscape Navigator are user-friendly human-to-machine interfaces to the World Wide Web (www). Websites are formed by companies, individuals and anyone seeking to offer multimedia information; the commercial, social, and educational possibilities are endless. By accessing workshops, "ask the expert" forums, online conferences, training, and virtual classrooms, the motorcyclist can learn whatever is desired.

Search engines like Yahoo, Excite, and Alta

Vista make it simple to find what you are looking for. Need to map out a trip route? Look up <www.mapquest.com>. Just a mouse point and click away, web pages can show you motorcycle related headline news, and upcoming events on sites like <www.americanmotor.com>. Harley-Davidson artwork, biker bars, books, classifieds, clip art, chat board, contests, bikes, dealers, jewelry, parts, patches, rentals, clothing, and toys can all be found on <www.bikerheaven.com/>. Looking for political information just about anything else important to the motorcyclist? Take a look at <www.lonebiker.com>.

To deal with the open system of the Internet, companies are forming new management hierarchies that will directly affect the motorcyclist as a consumer. Companies have numerous capabilities in real-time, such as product tracking, inventory control, up-to-date electronic sales brochures. Interactive on-line sales and customer service can now be handled by computers and the Internet. Manufacturers' web pages detail product statistics. Aftermarket products and additions for that scooter you're dreaming of can be discovered at leisure and ordered in the wee hours of the morning when your spouse is asleep.

The Internet is creating a "global community." An electronically co-authored research paper reported, "The traditional process of international standardization based on mailed documents cannot cope any more with the rapid progress of technology and the globalization of the world market."*(2.)

The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) is an international federation representing 130 countries. Its goal is to promote the global development of standardization. The format of credit cards, phone cards, film, and thousands of items, is derived from an ISO International Standard. "The existence of non-harmonized standards for similar technologies in different countries or regions can contribute to so-called "technical barriers to trade." *(3.) Sharing identical information, entertainment and technology, and purchasing the same products from the same multi-national corporations, people across the globe are becoming "... conversant in the universal language of popular culture and

commercial advertising. ... a cozy little global village of common understanding," according to James Geary in a Time Magazine story. -(4.)

While globalization has its obvious benefits, it also poses a danger to motorcyclists. Remember, globalization is based on international standardization. The strictest standards will become the world standards. The Rhode Island Motorcycle Association pointed out in an article in NCOM's February newsletter, "Developing a new bike is very expensive; having to research all the different versions is even more expensive. At present they have to produce many different versions of the same bike to comply with the different national laws. The industry wants a GLOBAL STANDARD, so that they only have to produce one version, thereby lowering production costs."

So, it's good for the manufacturers, but the riders will pay. "Standardization" edicts may include end of life vehicle directives eliminating Vintage and Classic motorcycles from the road, protective armored high visibility clothing, banning of open face helmets, graduated licensing based on engine size and years of experience, bike bans on certain roads, road tax increases, restrictive emission controls, road worthiness and tire standards. Even more ominous, anti-tampering regulations and construction standards are on the horizon. These measures may ban air-cooled engines, open chain drives, two-strokes, and tuning and customizing. Global harmonization of vehicle standards is one result of modern technology. Using modern technology is one way motorcyclists can control the extent that these standards are implemented. Learn to use the Internet to your advantage.

Motorcyclists can't afford to ignore the implications in this new world of actions and consequences. For you as a consumer, citizen, and motorcyclist, information is a valuable commodity. The marketplace is the Internet. Are you seeking customer satisfaction, trying to contact a club, publicizing events, organizing runs, looking for a tourist attraction, or just looking for an old riding buddy? The answers are easy to find. Every newly discovered road has its scenic vistas, hidden curves, and unforeseen potholes. Motorcyclists need to ride the Internet highway to learn

how to avoid its pitfalls and enjoy its benefits.

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Motorcycles, Advocacy and the Internet - Part 2

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We the people.... The powerful words that began a democracy still hold true today. The Internet allows freedom of speech in an explosive glut of information and opinions. When I interviewed motorcycle rights activists around the country that use the Internet extensively, it became obvious that the role of the motorcyclist's rights advocate has been radically redefined. In an era when our basic rights and freedoms are diminished daily, the Internet is perhaps the last bastion of truly free speech. There is an undercurrent of awareness growing within the motorcycling as a result of the Internet.

Tony "Pan" Sanfelipo, the founder of BOLT (Bikers of a Lesser Tolerance) of Wisconsin and founder and member of the Board of ABATE of Wisconsin, uses the Internet to reach as many as possible with his message and information. Taking a firm stance regarding riding freedom, he explained, "Our philosophy is that you can't compromise those things that are protected rights, such as First Amendment rights or guarantees to be left alone from burdensome government controls." Tony Pan is not alone. From New York to California, motorcyclists are increasingly concerned over the intrusion of government into their private lives. Active involvement in motorcyclists' rights organizations (MROs) is becoming easier

as the flow of information increases, and motorcyclists realize the importance of protecting the freedom to ride.

Research and cross referencing, once arduous, now can be rapidly accomplished. For the knowledgeable computer user, searches take seconds with just a few clicks of a button. Steven Shmerler is a professional web designer/consultant. His company, SAS Entertainment, has been building websites since 1994. He is on the Advisory Board for the Association of Internet Professionals, and is the webmaster for the International Interactive Communications Society. An expert in the field, Steven is a lecturer and teacher on the subject of the Internet. He is also the founder and editor of Bikers Rights Online <<http://www.sasnet.com/bro/>>, an informative site with links to major helmet statistics and studies. Steven commented, "The Internet has leveled the playing field for many industries including rights organizations. It has been very exciting seeing the motorcycling community plug into the net. Prior to the Internet explosion a few years ago, many bikers and their rights organizations didn't even have fax access for all their leaders, board members or certainly their membership. There is no question that the Internet and email has given all of us a powerful communication tool."

Motorcyclists' Rights Organizations (MROs), from the American Motorcyclists Association (AMA) to local ABATE chapters, need to maintain an operating cash flow to afford the daily costs of running a voluntary organization. Printing, mailing, secretarial, staff, and accountants all add up. Rick "Animal" Henry, the founder of BOLT of Pennsylvania <www.bolt-of-pa.com>, interviewed via computer chat, told of the power to implement and act. "[In cyber space] there is really no need for an office or a staff. Info for the public goes on a web site, done by a volunteer, and printed from the site. Information not for public consumption is sent via email, or posted on password protected pages. We know the power

of the Internet, and we use it to its utmost ability." Virtual MROs like BOLT can reach those that previously lacked the time to participate.

M/C Laws is a Usenet discussion group subscribed to in digest form. Owned by Lee Jordan, it is a hotbed of controversy, activism, intrigue and information. Despite being embroiled in constant flame wars, activists across the nation meet to discuss relevant issues. Alliances are made, research is shared, and victories celebrated. Lee's site, *Helmet Law Info* <www.anaheim.quik.com/ljordan/lawinfo.htm>, is a widely used web page.

Another digest, the *Motorcycle Safety Digest* <safety-digest-owner@magpie.com> provides a forum for conversation on safety issues. Owned by Steve Manes, the users tend to speak in a moderate voice seeking to share knowledge.

Joe "Cowboy" Dickey, is a lifetime ABATE member, charter PCOM member, officer for Freedom Fighters Chapter of PCOM, member of the AMA, MRF, and BOLT. Cowboy covers his bases. He is the owner of "The List," a daily missive delivered by email which is comprised of the latest relevant news articles, press releases, and communications from freedom activists. Cowboy adds personal comments and astute observations. He illustrates the efficiency of a list. "Because of the computer's attraction, it has succeeded in building the communication 'cells' that were really only an unworkable concept when all we had was a telephone tree. Instead of making a couple thousand phone calls for a couple more thousand dollars, I can drop info on The List at no cost and be pretty sure it will be read by most within 24 hours."

Web sites can act as the ultimate educator. On Cowboy's <lonebiker.com> site, resources, telephone numbers and information is abundant. Links allow the user to visit the Supreme Court archives, state governments, federal register, or get an exact copy of pending legislation including the calendar of the legislative body that may vote on it.

Personally written letters with return addresses always receive more attention from legislators, but e-mail is rapidly gaining respectability. Legislators now have staff assigned

to do e-mail and research. Cowboy relates, "Not only has rapid fire communication made public officials more responsive to our wishes, it has also served to keep our own officers answerable." There is always resistance to new technology in particular if the medium exposes what was previously hidden. Noting the misuse of the medium, he said, "There is an enormous amount of responsibility connected with that much power and in the wrong hands it can result in the opposite of the desired effect."

Progress??

ABATE of Pennsylvania uses web pages to keep membership up to date. While there is an awareness of the advantages of the Internet, at the same time caution pervades. At the State ABATE of PA Legislative Seminar in January, an article entitled "You Call This Progress" was given to participants. It was written by Seth Shostak, an astronomer at the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Life Institute (SETI). Shostak derides the use of e-mail claiming it is aggressive and intrusive. The immediacy of e-mail is called a "knee jerk reaction," promoting shallow, poorly written correspondence. Shostak considered the ease of communication a threat similar to "... hordes of motivated Mongolians, [that] just keep on coming." Selectively ignoring any benefits and disregarding content, he complains about improper grammar. Legitimate concerns over misuse have many state ABATEs determining "official policy" regarding the use of modern methods of communications.

The Motorcycle Riders Foundation (MRF) and the AMA use the Internet and email extensively. "People are talking about these cyber-communities if you will, and that's the way information flows now. It's not through the US Mail. There is nothing that can ever replace sitting down talking human being to human being. The inflection in your voice, the way you present something, your body language, all those things go into a conversation. You also can't replace a telephone conversation because you can hear how the person is feeling. There is less chance for misunderstanding," notes Mark Buckner, President of the MRF.

The influence of one individual can cause repercussions. Personal ideas can be mistaken for organizational position. ABATE of New York officers put a disclaimer on their e-mails and postings to avoid confusion. The disclaimer states that the content is a personal opinion and not necessarily that of ABATE of NY. Some members refuse to use disclaimers, considering it an excessive fear and caution.

Speed: the Upside

Mark Buckner is excited about the possibilities for rights activists. "No longer do we have to go to a library and research ... or go through all the hoops and jump through everything trying to find things. All you have to do is sit at your computer, type in a search criteria, and you are there. Your research is sped up, I mean it's exponential how much more quickly we can get stuff."

Speed: the Downside

An incident occurred when Internet users were under the impression that Deals Gap (a section of road south of Knoxville, Tennessee along Highway 129), was closed to motorcyclists. Letters and calls went out en-mass to politicians protesting a fictitious event. Unless the user followed all the links, there was no way of knowing it was a well concocted but ill advised April Fool's Day joke. Steve Zimmer commented, "... the incident is a prime example of inaccurate information getting circulated. Because of the speed the information was passed on, and the wide spread distribution, the Deals Gap incident grew to become an issue the leadership of MROs around the country dealt with for several weeks. Groups that have lists suffer a tremendous blow to their credibility when they send out erroneous information." Mark Buckner added, "Using that same tool (the Internet) we can get that situation under control quickly."

Steve Shmerler advises, "One precaution I would mention is that the immediacy of the Net can cause problems. Bad information can be distributed quickly. It takes extra caution to be certain that one knows the accuracy of information they distribute. Regardless of how diligent one is, bad info will always find its way into mass

distribution. This is not new with the Net. Traditional media publishes retractions and apologies all the time. That said, folks need to take some things with a grain of salt. Whenever I have been advised of a mistake, on the Bikers Rights Online site, I make all attempts to correct or clarify ASAP."

Slander and Libel

Web pages can bring lawsuits. Ignoring potential liability implications in the interest of free speech is not without its consequences. Sam Howe Veerhovek, Portland, Oregon, reported in a recent NY Times Web article that a federal jury ordered the creators of a World Wide Web site called "The Nuremberg Files" to pay more than \$107 million to Planned Parenthood and a group of doctors. The plaintiffs saw using the web as a way to stop what they called "domestic terrorism." The web site listed a "hit list" of names, address, and families of abortion doctors. The defendants contend they did not advocate violence or unlawful intimidation and believe their Constitutional right to free speech has been violated. "They vowed to appeal, and legal experts believe the case may well wind up in the Supreme Court as a major test of the line between protected speech and unlawful intimidation," according to Veerhovek.

As the Internet is new territory, the legal ramifications of alleged slanderous statements have not been fully explored. One zealous motorcyclist activist removed web pages from the net as a result of legal and personal threats to him and his family.

Influence and Numbers

According to Steve Shmerler the influence of the Internet is growing. Regarding his site, "We are getting thousands of hits from all *OVER* the world now on a daily basis. Our stats have really grown, which is extremely exciting. We are currently compiling a survey on how helmet laws have affected ridership to hopefully debunk some of the disinformation that various authorities spread about how helmet laws have supposedly reduced accidents...*WHICH IS IMPOSSIBLE*."

Animal recounted an instance exemplifying

the ability to mobilize. "Back when Gov. Casey was in office, we were on the verge of automobile emissions testing in Pennsylvania.... A very small but loud group of us, using the net and faxes, were able to throw a wrench in the mandatory emissions testing by using a few well proven tricks. Politicians respond to numbers, such as numbers of letters, faxes, and phone calls. While they were on Thanksgiving break that year, three of us took turns writing one page letters to every Rep and Senator in Harrisburg, PA, literally flooding the offices with fax paper.... We grouped up with auto clubs, and called into the offices hourly. Knowing those calls would be logged, we need no membership base, because all of the costs are absorbed by the people involved."

Growing Pains

On a final note, Mark Buckner advises to just delete junk e-mail. "Most of the information that

is out there is good, you just have to get more adept wading through it." Steve Zimmer sums it up neatly, "As a membership organization that is a clearing house for a lot of the information circulated, the Motorcycle Riders Foundation sees this information explosion as an opportunity to increase our effectiveness. There are tremendous advantages to being able to get the information out quickly. We can be more responsive to the needs of our membership. Action alerts are more effective because the action response begins immediately. SMRO grassroots efforts are improved with one more way to connect their membership to their federal legislators."

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