readers' writes

While residents in North Lincolnshire are feeling ignored by the broadband revolution, people in West Yorkshire are struggling under a mountain of unwanted printers that cost less than their replacement cartridges. And in Lyme Regis there's some debate over the value of dpi

Going dotty

Are printer manufacturers, with their sophisticated technology, having us on? My Epson printer achieves a whopping 2,880dpi (dots per inch) in full colour but when I compare 720dpi resolution with 1,440dpi and 2,880dpi I just can't see any difference. I therefore use the 720dpi as my print standard, which is excellent.

I read a recent newspaper article that stated a resolution of 360dpi was adequate. I can only see a slight difference between 360dpi and 720dpi, so why on earth are manufacturers bringing out printers with even higher dpi?

Forget 5,000dpi, I would like to see more depth of colour on the page or perhaps a different paper type option. Bog-standard A4 paper is alright, but I would like to print on 250g watercolour paper sometimes or even tissue paper. How about having a button I can press for this?

P J C Joyce, Lyme Regis

Legal lassitude

I am considering moving house soon and will be putting most of my hi-fi equipment into storage along with my CD collection. I will, however, be taking my trusty computer with me. It's hooked up to a 5.1 surround sound system so I thought I would copy my CDs to the hard disk. This would allow me to listen to them while temporarily living in rented accommodation.

After reading your ConsumerWatch article *Fair shares* (Spring 03 issue), however, I realised that by doing so I would be breaking the law. I do not intend to make my music available to anyone else nor will I leave my CDs with anybody who could listen to them.

Should I now delete all music from my hard disk? Should I be worried about a knock at the door? Where do you draw the line? For that matter, the backup copies I regularly make of my personal data files invariably include some software. Have I broken the law there too?

I realise that software is a whole different kettle of fish and that copyright laws depend specifically on the licence that comes with the software, but who reads through every licence?

Modern digital-based life is far too complex to fit within the constraints of some of these laws and I for one think it is time they were reviewed.
Anthony Dowling, via email

Guy Dixon replies: if you follow UK copyright law to the letter you don't have a legal right to copy your CDs to another format unless you have the expressed permission of the owners of the intellectual property – the record labels. However, the record labels have bigger fish to fry. They're far more concerned about heavy-duty file swapping going on over sites such as Kazaa than whether you've copied CDs to your hard disk.

When it comes to software, you don't necessarily have the legal right to copy discs for your own use, but again users making single backups aren't targeted – the implications of policing a more draconian approach would be huge.

Speed sick

I am getting very sick of hearing about the broadband revolution. My home is in Kirton Lindsey – population approximately 3,500 – in North Lincolnshire, directly eight miles south of Scunthorpe and 17 miles north of Lincoln. But I cannot get any broadband access as, apparently, I live in the geographical equivalent of Outer Mongolia.
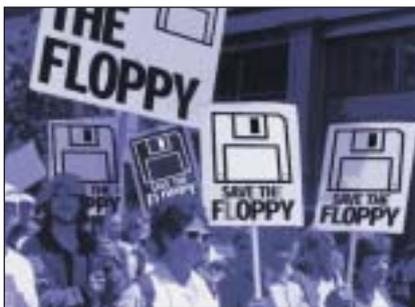
According to NTL's web page the whole of Northern Lincolnshire is covered. This is not true: the cables run a mile past town (up the A15 on their way from Lincoln to Scunthorpe and Grimsby). Nowhere in Northern Lincolnshire has coverage other than these main towns. I know people in Barton, which is three times the size of Kirton, who have the cable running past their houses but NTL won't connect them.

The BT registration scheme is also dubious. You can supposedly register via several links but they appear to go to different screens, only one of which allows any sort of check on registration progress. And needless to say, a paltry 31 people have so far registered in Kirton.

All these companies bleat on about getting people to sign up but they only seem to connect mainline towns. Who says the townies are the people most likely to register anyway? They have access to libraries and internet cafes providing broadband facilities.

We are not millions of miles from anywhere. We are computer literate and want the same access as big towns. So instead of chasing 'easy' locations, take a risk – get some cables laid and exchanges changed. You will have more demand for the service than you think.
Richard Gray, via email

Floppy loss

April 03's News includes a story about Dell planning to sell PC systems without a floppy drive. You go on to say the decision is hardly surprising as the floppy drive has long been functionally obsolete. Well, my computer doesn't have a floppy drive and I've had a heck of a job recently finding out how to do the following jobs:

1. update Bios (Abit motherboard);
2. install a new hard drive (Seagate);
3. make an image of a drive using Norton Ghost (Symantec).

It turns out that you can do these jobs quite easily without a floppy disk but the instructions given by each of the manufacturers in question assume you can boot your computer into DOS using a boot floppy and give no alternatives.

Only in the case of Symantec have I been able to get help, via its technical support, on how to run all modules of their programme without a floppy disk available. Even their advice came with the caveat: "Symantec does not support this mode of operation."

Flashing my motherboard with a new Bios was particularly harrowing and I half expected to wipe everything out, but I needn't have worried. I booted my Windows 98 SE PC into pure DOS mode and ran the flash utility from the C drive.
Mike Clough, via email

Emma Northam replies: don't get me started! I've had a rant about this very subject in Byteback (see page 240). And when I mentioned Dell's plans for the floppy to our IT manager, Geoff, you should have seen the look of incredulity his face. Console yourself with the fact that floppy drives are only about £10 a pop, so you can at least opt to install one yourself without breaking the bank.

Star letter

Having spent £99.99 on a three-in-one machine six months ago, I now find that replacement ink cartridges cost £102.60. I can buy a replacement MFD (multifunction device) for less.

Thousands of people around the country must be trashing their machines to save money on new ink cartridges. Countless perfectly good printers are therefore being thrown away, adding to the mountain of unwanted electrical goods, entirely because of the high cost of replacement ink.

Recycling will not work as the same problem will face the printer's next recipient. Surely this problem flies in the face of the WEEE (Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment) directive and yet we have manufacturers such as Lexmark, featured in your supplier profile, extolling the use of clever chips which can signal the user when inks levels are low. Such vital information adds around £30 to the cost of each cartridge.

Have we gone mad? Do we really need this level of technology? Nasa spent millions of dollars perfecting a pen that will work upside down and in zero gravity; the Soviet Union solved the same problem simply by giving their astronauts pencils.
Paul Sainty, Normanton, W Yorkshire

Andrew Charlesworth replies: inkjet printers are cheap because the manufacturers recoup the loss they make on the printer with high-margin cartridges. There are other products where this pricing model also prevails – for example, video game consoles and razors/blades. Nevertheless, the Office of Fair Trading is looking into the price of inkjet printers and cartridges following its report on the consumer IT business published in December 02.

Write to us

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Private lines

I'm not quite sure what the debate about ID cards (News, April 03) has to do with a computer magazine, but I would like to stick my oar in if I may. Does it not occur to those who are so strenuously against them that possibly as much as 85 to 90 percent of the population already have some form of ID card? Drivers have photocard licences, while utility company representatives wear identity badges, as do council and social workers.

We Brits are the only people in the EC who must carry passports when travelling in and around Europe. There are a number of benefits to leaving a passport at home, not least a reduction in fraud.
Brian Lewis, via email

Emma Northam replies: terrorism and immigration have rather put the kibosh on us leaving our passports at home. The trouble is, in their current form, passports aren't enough. ID cards would ostensibly be more secure, but the government's also considering a passport-cum-ID card that would solve both problems.

Why cover ID cards in a PC mag? Well, aside from obvious data protection issues for businesses and the matters of privacy and security for all of us, it's something that has repercussions throughout IT.

Biometric security technologies that ID cards might include, such as fingerprint-recognition, are already available in some new notebooks – surely a feature of interest to any paranoid PC owner… ■