Exclusive: A Profile of Two Online Educators

BY ERIC W. HUNTER

When most people think of learning they think of classrooms, libraries, lectures, and taking notes. That is all changing. With the exploding popularity of personal computers and online services, society is redefining the world of education. Today anyone with a personal computer and a modem can take advantage of the wide array of online educational offerings.

Lary Crews and Steve Morill are two online educators who teach writing on America Online. They took a bit of time out of their hectic schedules to exchange e-mail with me on their opinions and experiences as instructors in this developing field.

EH: *First of all, how about a little background information. Tell me about yourself. Where do you live? Outside of teaching for AOL, what do you do for a living?*

LC: I live in Sarasota, Florida, on the west coast of the state between Tampa and Fort Myers. I was the first interactive online fiction instructor in America, but since I have attracted several others to join me on AOL, I am now only *one* of the first. I am a staff announcer at a radio station (that accounts for 52% of my income), I write six monthly columns (another 10%), and I teach for America Online (the remaining 38%).

SM: I live in Tampa, Florida. I've been a full-time freelancer for more than 10 years. I started teaching nonfiction magazine writing in a local private school about 5 years ago.

EH: *When did you first go online and why?*

SM: I joined CompuServe, AOL, Prodigy, and GEnie all at the same time about 8 years ago. I have since discovered that the AOL's Writer's Club is better than the Journalism Forum on CompuServe, although I still prefer the research capabilities of CompuServe.

LC: I've been online since 1991. I went online so I could communicate with other writers.

Profiles

EH: *How did you get involved with teaching online?*

SM: I started two local writing clubs, one for beginners and one for professionals – and coordinated with Lary Crews, who wrote for many of the same magazines I did. I got Lary interested in online services, and he in turn came to me and told me about online teaching. He was teaching his Writing the Novel course on AOL. I applied for and got the job of teaching the Freelance Nonfiction Writing course.

LC: When I was on Prodigy I opened a subject heading called "Ask Lary Crews" and then I posted a variation on my resumé to explain why

I had the audacity to offer my advice. To my amazement, I got about 4,000 questions over an 18-month period, and I answered them all. I was a big hit with the writers, and even had the support of the guy Prodigy *paid* to do similar stuff, a self-acknowledged non-fiction pro named Digby Diehl. Unfortunately, Prodigy brass totally ignored my volunteer work. So I tried America Online in June 1993 and *instantly* fell in love with the superior graphics, the lack of ads, the easy to navigate system. Again, I opened my "Ask Lary Crews" folders (this time in both fiction and nonfiction categories) and started doing my volunteer work. (I convinced Steve Morill, a former student of mine, to take over the nonfiction area with a folder called "Steve Morrill's Nonfiction Q&A" and to teach a

Flaws Leave I-Way Vulnerable

As reported by Cowles/SIMBA Media Daily, *February 26, 1995*

The information highway may be vulnerable to attack due to flaws in some of the most popular Internet software, according to the Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT), a federally-funded center based at Carnegie Mellon University. CERT issued advisories about flaws in both Mosaic and Sendmail.

News

The flaw in Mosaic could allow hackers to gain control of the Web's servers, and poses the risk of attack by a "worm," a program that could wipe out all Web sites. The flaw in Sendmail, which is one of the most popular programs used on the

Inside:

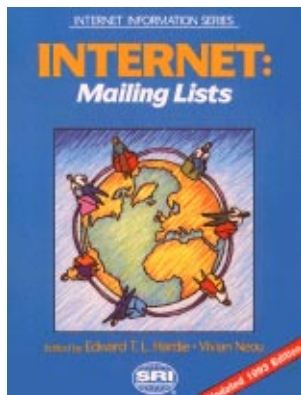# Three Books for Keeping Literate on the Net

BY JEFFREY COHEN

The Internet Book *by Douglas E. Comer ($24.95, Prentice-Hall, New York)*

Internet: Mailing Lists *(updated 1993 edition) edited by Edward Hardie and Vivian Neou ($24.95, Prentice-Hall, New York)*

The Mosaic Handbook for the Mac *by Dale Dougherty and Richard Koman ($29.95, O'Reilly & Associates, New York)*

There are Internet books for absolute beginners. Then there is The Internet Book, a recent entry to the burgeoning Net marketplace, by Purdue University Professor Douglas Comer. As one of the original researchers who contributed to the foundation of the Internet in the 70s and 80s, his qualifications are indisputable. He has, however, produced a semi-scholarly text that may be over the heads of casual readers.

In fact, Prentice-Hall is marketing the book through its Professional Technical Reference group. This is a wise choice. While The Internet Book covers all the regular terrain of more basic materials, its tone speaks volumes about its author and the intricacies of the Net as a whole. There is a sense of wonderment present that could give the uninitiated shivers. Not quite a textbook but certainly not a starter kit, the book connects all the dots and points a user in the right direction. But the user should have read at least one other book about the Internet before advancing to this one.

The first of four sections introduces communication system concepts and terminology (digital, analog, and universal service). The second goes over the birth and incredible growth of the Internet. The third handles basic technology and capabilities. The fourth and final section describes services on the Net. These divisions are fair and well-explained; they are just a tad too collegiate for the usual Barnes and Noble-shopping weekend computer buff.

Comer focuses on the fundamentals of networking, but some of us would rather not get into the Internet from that angle. The Internet Book is a good selection for someone who has already experimented with the Net and wants a senior perspective on what is possible out there.

Book Reviews

Another lackluster selection is Internet: Mailing Lists. This book is touted as the updated edition for 1993, but given the way Internet services expand geometrically, this tome is inadequate in the current marketplace. Would you really trust a selection marked "Last update: 12-October-91"?

What makes this book even more outdated is the increase in FTP sites which have Frequently Asked Questions for mailing lists. I have visited over a dozen servers with mailing list files that routinely take 500k on my hard drive when downloaded. These lists are all more current that Internet: Mailing Lists. This book is just another example of how publishers initially jumped on the Internet bandwagon and started pumping out volumes on any related topic. This one's time has passed.

Looking to get connected to the World Wide Web to determine if it suits your business purposes? O'Reilly & Associates has its Mosaic Handbook series for Windows, X Window System, and Macintosh. Spyglass NCSA Mosaic software in enclosed with each edition, although version 1.0 is now being surpassed by several other WWW applications.

The packages introduce Mosaic as a way to

Approaching Infinity

BY MICHAEL DACONTA

The Internet and World Wide Web are growing exponentially across the globe. With only 24 hours in the day, more activities and computers are being added to this vast network than you can explore. This phenomenon of an expanding cyberspace is bringing millions of ordinary people in physical contact with the concept of something infinite, something that is beyond our physical access or comprehension. How each of us handles this phenomenon will define both effectiveness and maturity in the 21st century.

In order to assist the virtual pioneers who read *Virtual Inc.* I would like to offer four strategies for handling the infinite:

ADMISSION AND ACCEPTANCE. It's a difficult thing to admit that we are finite. It's akin to the process of admitting we are all imperfect or all sinners. But this should not be an emotional event that is belabored. It is a fact and only meant to be noted and respected as such. This "finiteness" levels the playing field by applying to all. So once you accept it, you move on to appreciating the time you have. Understanding, in turn, leads to using your time effectively and not wasting it. Seize the day!

BRACKETING. Bracketing is the discipline of human multi-tasking. Human multi-tasking involves a clean and efficient switch from one task to the next. There should be no "bleedover" in tasks. A previous task (or problem) must not

Editor's Word

influence the current task.

PRIORITIES. Even with an efficient use of time and bracketing, we are still faced with more to do than is physically possible. This situation brings us to the linchpin of a sound life: priorities. Proper prioritizing of events requires three skills: judgment, bracketing, and self-assurance. Judgment is rendered on all potential activities in order to rank their in importance. Of course this is an ongoing activity. Once the day's activities are ordered, you place them in a "pipeline" or "queue." You then use proper bracketing to concentrate effectively on the most important task. Lastly, you are self-assured that you are working on what is most important, and therefore are relieved of the burden of not finishing everything.

SERENDIPITY. Beware of over-scheduling your day. Recently I learned (the hard way) that being too busy stifles creativity. You need to keep open time for beautiful events, ideas, scenery, and moments to "just happen." You do this by adding flexibility to your schedule. Give yourself a little extra time to accomplish things. You will find yourself more relaxed, with both your happiness and creativity increased!

Now you are ready to "leap into the infinite." See you on the other side! ■

> *Recently I learned (the hard way) that being too busy stifles creativity.*

A Profile of Two Online Educators

magazine writing course.) Less than 60 days after I began, the leader of the Writer's Club asked me if I'd be willing to be the fiction consultant for the Writer's Club. I said, "You bet." A week later, the head of AOL's Interactive Education Service (which I had never heard of) asked me if I was interested in teaching a writing course.

EH: *Tell me about teaching online from the instructor's perspective. What are the pros and cons?*

SM: I've learned that an online class is better than an in-person class in some ways. I can post stuff to a private library and leave it there for the students to get later. I can take offline time to think about questions and give better answers. Also, teaching online helps my writing career in two ways: First, it earns me money. Second, I'm writing a book covering the same things I'm teaching, so the feedback from the students is valuable to that process. But the online class has some disadvantages: I cannot hand documents to my students; I have to either describe them or tell the students where to obtain similar documents. (An example would be copyright forms.) On the whole, I've enjoyed my experience, and I do manage to keep in touch with some of my students after the class ends – something I missed in the in-person classes, where I never got to know the students anyway.

LC: I like helping other people write their books and helping them overcome their fear. I've been there, and I know what I am talking about; it is a pleasure to help someone else.

EH: *How would you compare teaching in-person to teaching online?*

LC: Online teaching pays considerably better, and I think I am able to teach more effectively online than I do at seminars and conferences. Online I am teaching writing *in writing.* I think students learn and retain much more than they do just listening to me talk.

SM: The class I teach in-person is a single day, whereas the online class lasts 8 weeks; so I actually get to know my students much better online. During the 2-hour classes and in e-mail conversations we share personal and professional problems and successes.

EH: *What do you find most difficult about*

teaching online? How would you change the online teaching/learning process if you could?*

LC: Reading their homework is the most time-consuming and difficult part of the course; not because of any lack of quality, but because of the enormous amount of time involved. I would make it easier for people to get to their class area. At the moment, they have to click through five menus to get to our private area. I would prefer just a keyword. I'd also make it easier to register for the classes in the first place.

SM: Well, it's not face-to-face, so there's no eye contact, no raised hand with a question (although we do get around that problem). The online class tends to be slow for the student who is staring at a screen and doing very little for 2 hours. For the instructor it's very hectic indeed. I would just as soon skip the 2-hour classes and instead have shorter question-and-answer sessions.

EH: *Do you think it's easy to make the transition from teaching in person to teaching online? Should training for teaching online begin to be addressed in teaching degree programs any time soon? Is such training is even necessary?*

SM: I had to rewrite my course more than I had expected to accommodate both the restrictions and the new possibilities of teaching online. I had to learn how to use "macros" to transfer data swiftly to the screen to reduce the waiting time the students suffer through. Otherwise, I had no problem with the transition. I don't see any need for educational training for online teaching. These courses are similar to community-education college courses where, oddly enough, professional teaching credentials

aren't the most important consideration. Most important is knowing the material and knowing how to use the computer system for the maximum benefit to the student.

LC: I think I am unique in that I "think in writing," so to speak, so typing to people is as easy for me as speaking to them. (I've been typing for 30 years.) The typing drives some teachers nuts. With respect to degree programs including training for online teaching, I doubt it will be included soon. It usually takes academics a generation to catch up to the real world. *Some* training would be good but not necessarily in a college-level course.

EH: *What do you see as the future of online education? I understand the number of online programs through which one can actually get a degree is growing. Do you see the number of these increasing?*

SM: I think we see only the bare beginning here. Online instruction will soon add another option to correspondence courses and educational television programs. I see the day coming when the idea of someone actually spending four years on campus earning a BA will be regarded as quaint. I see the busy parent or business person having the time now to learn something new in their spare time, rescued from the need to find babysitters or time to drive somewhere. And the tutoring program here is also just the beginning. Soon it will be normal for kids to dial up AOL for meetings with educational mentors, or one-on-one conversations with scientists, business people, or politicians.

EH: *What are your views on the "information superhighway"? Will it really play a significant role in our everyday lives?*

LC: At the moment it is mostly "vaporware" and hype. Only about 3% of Americans own computers with modems.

SM: Well, only a small percentage of people actually subscribe to and read a newspaper
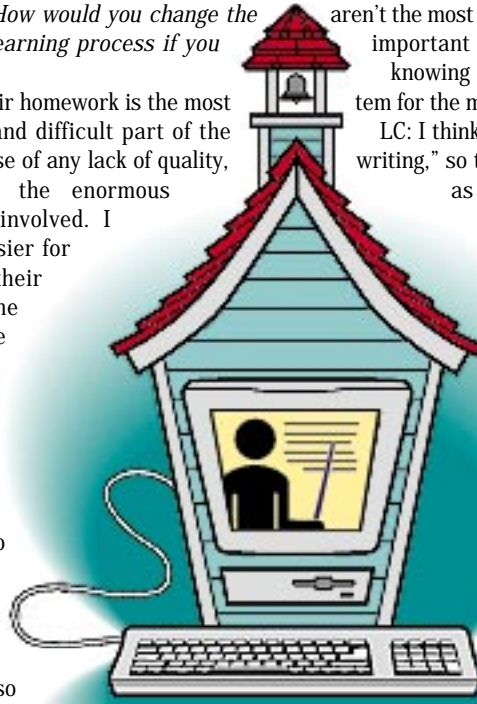
> *By the turn of the century you're going to be seeing a new definition of the old adage that "knowledge is power."*

Software Flaws Leave I-Way Vulnerable *continued*

several million hub computers that route electronic mail through the I-way, could potentially allow a hacker to commandeer computers. CERT has issued instructions to patch both problems.

CERT advisories can be found in the "comp.security.announce" USENET newsgroup.

Internet Providers not Forced to Screen Messages

As reported by Cowles/SIMBA Media Daily, February 22, 1995

A U.S. District Court judge extended a restraining order against a former Scientology minister, but declined to hold an Internet service provider and a bulletin board operator responsible for messages that the former minister posted while using their services.

Dennis Ehrlich, 48, a writer who turned against the church after he left in 1982, is a frequent contributor to the "alt.religion.scientology" USENET newsgroup. He has posted portions of church publications and documents, prompting church officials to go to court. The church wanted Netcom On-Line Communication Services and a Los Angeles BBS operator to screen messages it claimed would compromise copyrights and trade secrets.

Civil liberties advocates opposed the move, fearing that it would threaten open discussion on the internet. "Any tactics that are designed to scare providers from carrying information are private censorship, and that is just intolerable on the networks," said Shari Steele of the Electronic Frontier Foundation.

Church supporters have been accused by participants of the newsgroup of deleting messages and attempting to have the newsgroup removed from the Internet. ■

Three Books for Keeping Literate on the Net *continued*

navigate and find information and interesting sites on the Web. Mosaic can actually supplant other traditional Internet functions such as FTP and Gopher. Readers also learn how to add external viewers to allow many additional file types, and how to customize Mosaic, affecting screen elements, colors, and fonts. Hyptertext Markup Language (HTML), which is used to format WWW documents, is also discussed.
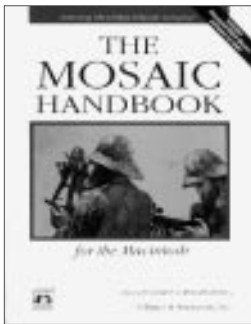
I found this book to be the most useful of the three reviewed here. Using the Mosaic I downloaded, I was able to FTP to a server in Canada and grab a copy of a shareware HTML Editor for the Mac, which was subsequently used to create Web pages for my company's in-progress Web server. The text was easy to follow and understand, and I felt confident recommending it to other less-experienced Web browsers.

Although the software is outdated, the Mosaic Handbooks will give you basic experience and allow access to the Global Network Navigator, a premier World Wide Web information service developed by O'Reilly & Associates. It contains navigational guides to help Mosaic users discover Internet resources. It also provides news and information services in areas such as travel, personal finance, education, and sports.

With businesses moving in a more Web-directed vein, it is time for individuals to make the move on their own, before the savvy surfers wash right over them. The Mosaic Handbooks are an effective board to use to paddle into the surf. ■

A Profile of Two Online Educators *continued*

every day, and nobody suggests that newspapers are not mainstream. I think the information highway is going to be bigger than anyone now thinks – but not necessarily in the direction they now think. It's also going to be a toll road; only those with the money and the technical skill are going to be able to use it. By the turn of the century you're going to be seeing a new definition of the old adage that "knowledge is power". It may not be a pretty sight.

EH: *What do you think it will take to make such a virtual highway truly mainstream?*

SM: It doesn't matter what it's going to take, it's going to happen – period. And the increased information access and computer linking is *already* a part of the life of every American – more so than perhaps in any other country. I don't mean to say that every American must have a computer and modem and be wired in. I mean that when the cops can pick up a wino on a street corner and, by typing his name into a computer in their car, learn his entire life history, then the information highway is affecting all of us now.

LC: Once they find a way to make the Internet as simple as America Online, it will become more mainstream. But I doubt seriously if usage will exceed 20% of Americans in our lifetime. It will take stable hardware and *simple* software, both of which need to be inexpensive. ■

Virtual Inc.

✔ Yes! I'd love to subscribe. Here's the info you'll need:

Name ....

Address ....

City .... State .... Zip ....

Phone .... E-mail Address ....

Computer type and configuration ....

✔ Please start my subscription to Virtual Inc. at the rate of $30.00 per year (12 issues). I have an e-mail account and

Adobe Acrobat™ Reader 2.0.* I would like to subscribe for .... years. Total enclosed ....

Please send your check or money order to   Virtual Fusion Inc.
5160 Calle Bonita
Sierra Vista, AZ 85635

Payable to <u>Virtual Fusion</u>

Only $30 per year

12/94

* E-mail and the Acrobat™ Reader are needed to receive and read Virtual Inc. Acrobat is a registered trademark of Adobe Systems Incorporated