



ITS ALL ABOUT PEOPLE

DON'T DRINK AND HARD DRIVE

I was thunderstruck a few weeks back when reading an article by John Dvorak in *PC Computing* magazine describing a Bill due to go through US Congress which will make it illegal to use the Internet while drunk, or to discuss sexual matters over a public network. The article said that the Bill would allow the FBI to tap the phone lines and Broadband connectivity of anyone who "uses or abuses alcohol" while accessing the Internet and to intercept adult chat room messaging. Passage of the Bill is unlikely to meet any opposition because "Who in Congress wants to be seen to come out and support drunkenness and computer sex?" The Bill also has grass roots support from moderate Americans who believe that being drunk on a highway is bad, no matter what kind of highway it is, so the rules on DUI should be extended to the Information Superhighway."

Apart from the obvious privacy violations here it makes me mad to think that we are in a time in history where everything can be regulated and that even our access to the Internet, which is supposedly free of censorship, with abundant freedom of expression, is being compromised. Furthermore, the whole idea that government can attempt to curb and control your fundamental right to go on line after a few glasses of wine is simply Draconian.

An international study, commissioned as far back as 2000 to look into the issue, was given the brief "To determine the likely effect of drug and substance (social or otherwise) users whilst surfing the net, on the morals, productivity and wellbeing of small and impressionable countries". The tender which was won by Taiwanese based wellness company, Notipling, and headed by Lirpa Sloof, determined that indeed this should be banned by law in all Third World countries as "the 'lack of inhibitions which such states incur render the Net user at risk and therefore using any mood-altering substance whilst on line has the potential to cause more vulnerable users harm or induce them to inflict harm on others. Our research seems to indicate some fuzziness regarding the use of Prozac and other anti depressants and we are continuing to study the effects of such over-the-counter and prescription medicines." The study also had recommendations concerning the workplace, calling on employers to adopt a new and proactive approach.

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Elsewhere in the world, it revealed, large organizations are recognizing that employees who spend hours drinking and drugging into the wee small hours of the morning at the same time abusing the Internet are not as sharp and focused the next day at work as their less indulgent counterparts and are therefore less productive. Certain forward-thinking companies in the United States are now awarding Surf Breaks to employees so that they can log on whilst sober and free from home distractions. This radical move is designed to encourage employees to go to bed early knowing they can 'Surf Safe' in a controlled environment the following day. Effectively it's a win win situation – the employer gets a well-rested employee and the employee gets to access the Net and do 'their thing' for limited periods during work time.

Of course crazy things happen...usually in America. But to my horror I discovered that the study's recommendations have gained considerable credence locally and that a similar piece of legislation is working its way through the corridors of power in Botswana. This was confirmed by a certain senior official in the Ministry of Communication, Science and Technology. The official, who cannot be named for fear of libel, explained that indeed many of our own parliamentarians fear for the future of the country and its morals because of the amount of surfing whilst 'under the influence'. While America's concern seems to be limited to using the Net in an alcohol-induced state, Botswana's extends to drug use as well. A Parliamentary Committee has already been set up to follow up the conclusions of the Taiwanese study after ministers expressed their deep concern about the amount of Internet trafficking whilst under the influence and its wide-reaching effects on all aspects of our lives.

The number of Botswana surfing the net in this state was, as the Committee's report said, "worrisome". Of greater concern it went on to say, was the realisation that many people, when on line appear not to be 'under the influence' when in fact they are. This is particularly worrying because it groups those visibly under the influence with those that are under the influence but fall just below the visible 'under the influence' radar. As one senior official suggested 'this really brings to the fore the need to limit people's access to the Internet to non-drinking and lower substance abuse periods and to do that we need to ask people questions regarding exactly what they have taken prior to logging on and when they take it. In a nutshell current statistics are shaky and thus heralds the need for a more comprehensive study by government to establish how many of our citizens are partying in cyber space as opposed to the pub where they used to hang out and where at least their activities could be monitored and to a certain extent contained. We are also opposed to the granting of limited liquor licenses to Internet cafes.'

I think its safe to presume that the intent is that only the sober and drug-free should be permitted to access the Net in the future – legally at least.

Part of the problem is that the Information Age is here but the sixties have never really left, People will continue to consume too much alcohol and soft drugs use will always appeal! But as Bob Dylan said, the times they are a changing so are we ready to change and adapt to this new reality? The global Internet Clean-Up due to take place in a few days time will be a good test.

For those not in the know, next week the entire Internet will be shut down for cleaning for twenty-four hours from midnight on April 5th until 12pm April 6. This cleaning is apparently necessary to clear out all the "electronic flotsam and jetsam" that has accumulated in the network. Dead e-mail and inactive ftp, www, and gopher sites will be purged and all unnecessary Blogs removed. The cleaning will be carried out by "five very powerful Japanese-built multi-lingual Internet-crawling, wireless, fibre optic robotics (Toshiba ML-2274) sited in key global Net hot spots." During this period, users are warned to disconnect all devices from the Internet to minimize hard drive damage and data loss. Many people are also planning to place plastic bags over the ends of their computer 'airways' to catch the dust that might be blown out during this period.

You really have to commend this global initiative and thank goodness they are doing it over Easter because at least it will be less disruptive to business. The world has been assured faster Internet connections from mid-April onwards so it's worth the slight inconvenience, I say! But a word of warning to any serious drink/drug/surf addicts – 24 hours is a long time to have to go cold turkey and you might like to have a supportive friend there with you during the day-night exercise. And just think how great you'll feel on the 7th knowing you made it through.

Eish, I've just noticed the date on the newspaper. It's the 1st of April but don't let that fool you!

