

Hello. It looks like you're using an ad blocker that may prevent our website from working properly. To receive the best experience possible, please make sure any blockers are switched off and refresh the page.

If you have any questions or need help you can email us

## TECHNOLOGY

# The Bleeding Edge

Like any other technology that changes the way we live and work, the Internet is prey to all kinds of nonsensical speculation, hype and myth.

Sep. 01, 2006

*From the Sept. 2006 Issue*

Like any other technology that changes the way we live and work, the Internet is prey to all kinds of nonsensical speculation, hype and myth. I don't mean the kinds of myths that circulate via e-mail and cause millions of people to write their Congressman to oppose legislation that doesn't exist. Or even the hucksters trying to con you out of your life savings. I'm talking about the myths about the Internet itself.

Mythology has beset every major technological advance, from the printing press to the automobile. The printing press, for example, found almost immediate commercial success as a means to publish inexpensive pornography (you didn't really believe it was just used to print Bibles, did you?). But the public, commercial Internet is now in its 13th year, and it is time we shed a few of our most cherished myths:

The Internet is dangerous for children. You know the lurid tales. One in five children online have been approached by a sexual predator. There are more than 50,000 predators online at any time. Children can easily find pornography on the Net without even looking for it. Nice stories, but they are mostly just

that. The Internet is inherently no more dangerous than anywhere else, and the real threat to children — with a modicum of parental guidance — is minimal. If you are interested, you can find a better analysis of this by Benjamin Radford, editor of Skeptical Inquirer magazine, online at [www.livescience.com/othernews/060516\\_predatorpanic.html](http://www.livescience.com/othernews/060516_predatorpanic.html).

- **There is a huge racial “digital divide” in America.**

That would come as a shock to the millions of black, Hispanic and Asian families who use the Internet nearly every day. The most recent data from the Pew Internet and American Life Project shows that English-speaking Hispanics and Asians lead use of the Internet in America, while use by black families is closing rapidly. Does this mean there is no “divide” at all? No. The data clearly shows that among those who are not literate in English, there is a massive chasm. The divide isn’t based on race; it is based on illiteracy.

- **America is lagging behind other nations in use of the Internet.**

This is a more complicated myth, because it all hinges on what you call “lagging behind.” A whopping 77 percent of Americans have Internet access at home, but some other countries do have a larger online population or more broadband connections. But these countries tend to be small, with populations centered in a few urban areas, unlike the United States with its 3.5 million square miles with which to contend. These small countries are easier to wire, and in many cases can use cheaper technologies. In deployment of fiber — the Internet of the future — we enjoy a solid and growing lead.

- **The Internet is tax-free.** Okay, most accountants don’t

fall for this old saw, but you’d be amazed at how many others do. The reality is that online companies are not presently required to collect sales taxes for every transaction. The tax hasn’t gone away; you’re supposed to keep track of the purchases and remit the sales tax yourself.

And local governments are becoming increasingly aggressive about going after those who don’t.

- **The Internet began as a simple and peaceful academic network**

where everyone got along and treated each other with respect. Before we hold hands and sing “Kumbayah,” let’s just point out that the Internet has, since its inception, been a chaotic jumble of interconnected networks where it was common to find power struggles, jealousy, e-mail flame wars, bitter accusations and acrimony. We like to think otherwise for the same reason we think of the Fifties as “the good old days.”

There are certainly more myths. Like the idea that you can be anonymous online (You can't. It's getting easier to track you online every day, especially if you are breaking the law). Or the idea that everything you say online is protected free speech. Or that the Internet is a reliable way to communicate. Myths arise from a lack of understanding. For many Americans, the onset of this technology and its rapid emergence as a key consumer product have been difficult to grasp effectively. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that the Internet is so new that we don't have the same kinds of tools used to understand most industries. For example, no one is able to say how much of the nation's Gross National Product is attributable to the "information economy," or even how many people are employed in Internet-related jobs.

But as information is slowly gathered and the Internet matures, we will see corresponding changes in the ways we use it, how we safeguard it and how we perceive it. □

---

Mr. McClure is a consultant and widely published writer on technology issues.

Technology • Article

CPAPA is registered with the National Association of State Boards of Accountancy (NASBA) as a sponsor of continuing professional education on the National Registry of CPE Sponsors.

© 2023 Firmworks, LLC. All rights reserved