

Getting it Online

It's a brand new look at an old service.

If you've been wondering what the deal is with all those disks you keep getting in the mail, Luke Robinson has the answers.

LUKE ROBINSON Staff Writer

Now that I've reshingled my roof and am starting to tile my bathroom floor with all of the extra America Online disks that I have received lately, I think it's time to take a look at the old service one more time.

In 1985 Steve Case founded Quantum Computer Services, built to provide online services to Tandy and Commodore users. In 1989 Apple Computer commissioned Case to provide the Applelink Personal Service to its users. Although that partnership was dissolved, Case made the most of his efforts and used the engine from the Applelink software in his own new service, America Online. He made a name for himself by aggressively promoting the service in every venue he could find.

Of course, this is where the diskettes come in. Ever since 1993, when the first Windows version came out (don't worry, I'm not forgetting you Mac guys), AOL has made sure that its disks have found their way into every average home in the nation, by bundling the disks with magazines and modems, preloading them onto new computers, and sending them via mail to anyone who had even the slightest connection with the computer business.

What this means is that computer geeks (like yours truly) have ended up with dozens upon dozens of the things, and since you need only one, the rest have been put to good use as beer coasters, frisbees, and in their more mundane application, as storage devices, preferably for data that has nothing whatsoever to do with AOL.

AOL has had amazing success ever since. From zero subscribers in 1989, AOL has grown to be the largest commercial online service in the world, at almost 4 million subscribers. When this number surpassed Compuserve's healthy 3.5 million, it was considered a landmark, as Compuserve had long

been considered the king of online services.

America Online's appeal has been its ease of use and, more recently, its much-hyped access to the Internet, the huge global computer network that has been called the future of social interaction. Since 1993, when the mainstream press "discovered" the Net (which had been around for years), anything at all mentioning "the Internet" or "cyberspace" (not to mention that other blasted "highway" metaphor the press came up with) has become a hot item.

This is where AOL's problems begin. Marketing its ease of use has naturally attracted those people who might have not otherwise gotten online. Mix that with the Internet, a traditional haven of UNIX-hacking ultranerds with their own pecking order, and problems are bound to occur.

The perceived problem is AOL's impact on USENET, the worldwide system of discussion groups that sits on top of the Internet.

USENET has been around in one form or another since the '80s, and, like any social animal, it has developed its own codes of conduct and etiquette. As USENET was once a primarily academic system, veterans of the service came to dread the month of September, when hordes of university freshmen would discover the newsgroups and come storming in with little or no regard for custom or propriety. Often these "newbies" would ask totally inappropriate questions, such as asking about how to get pirated software in the newsgroup devoted to skiing.

So when AOL let its hordes of inexperienced users loose on USENET last



ETHAN MYERSON The Gamecock

year, there was an intensely negative reaction. USENET soon buzzed with talk of "September all year round," and any message sent by a person with AOL in their address was soon automatically regarded as suspect. Many veteran Net users even went so far as to adjust their news reading software so that any message originating from AOL wouldn't even show up in the groups.

A new newsgroup appeared, alt.aol-sucks, and it remains to this day an extremely popular outlet for AOL-induced angst. Needless to say, AOL got a bad name from this.

There is a flip side to this: when you come right down to it, AOL is easy to use. When the question came up of how to get my electronically-impaired mother on e-mail, America Online came immediately to mind (and, I admit, the AOL disks holding up one corner of the house influenced the decision somewhat). Even my mother can clickety-click her way to being wired, so I guess AOL has its good points after all. I just hope I don't catch Mom saying something stupid on the skiing newsgroup.

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