If print *is* obsolete, why won't it go away?

By John Gerstner, ABC

I t occurs to me that my office at Deere & Company is a communication world divided. The front half is where I process and warehouse the daily deluge of mail. It is mostly of the junk category — pseudo-letters trying to sell me something, conference brochures, newsletters about newsletters, computer catalogs, magazines, memos, and once in a great while, a quaint personal letter. This is the dead-tree side of my office.

The other half is my Way-Cool New Media side. It houses a ram-charged, gigabusting desktop computer so loaded down with multimedia, graphic, web authoring and miscellaneous software that it processes about as fast as a donkey running up the Grand Canyon — or so it seems as I sit, fingers poised over keys, impatiently waiting milliseconds for web pages to load. The computer is flanked by a big, honking monitor, 600 dpi color printer, flat-bed scanner, Syquest disk drive and a TV-VCR...all connected by a fearsome hairball of wires that snake along the floor like a python ready to spring. This is the electronic side of my office.

And so every day at work, I am tugged by the yin and yang of today's communication world. Do I attend to the never-ending stream of paper that is heaped on my desk, much of it lavishly printed and designed...or do I plug into the torrent of raw bits streaming onto my screen in the form of e-mail messages that beep their arrival, and web pages that flicker and flash...all just a mouse-click away. Atoms or bits? That is the question.

Well...I'm here to admit that for the past three years, the electronic side of my office has me in its web. I estimate I am now spending about 80 percent of my time working with New Media. This is quite an admission, considering when I started my communication career the ultimate high-tech communication tool was an electric typewriter, and the ultimate editing tools were a pair of scissors and cellophane tape.

It's not that I have totally forsaken my first love, print, for this younger, sexier communication mistress. Let's just say I've been enamored and intrigued ever since I first saw her enter the communication party three years ago. What makes this fling difficult is that I still have a "real" job. As manager of internal communication for Deere & Company I continue to plan strategy and create content for *JD Journal* magazine and "JD In Focus" video, plus consult with Deere management and unit communicators worldwide.

I must admit I am still a print person at heart. In my mind, you really can't compare a finely printed magazine to a web site, no matter how cool it is. Words printed in publications take on value, if for no other reason than they are expensive to produce and distribute. A magazine is real. You can start a fire with a magazine.

A web site, on the other hand, only exists on some distant server as an illusive metaphor of print. Unless I have all the computer gadgetry to plug in, I can't even see the brilliance. No one really likes to read text on a screen, and when it comes to reading in bed or bathroom, print wins hands down. Yet, we're all being cyber-hyped and dot-commed to death by — guess who — the print and television media. Go figure.

I suspect I am not the only print communicator straddling two worlds today. We are all victims of the Internet neutron bomb that dropped on Planet Earth three years ago and blew communication and commerce to bits...literally. Print is now obsolete, but it won't go away. It just has to reinvent itself, as radio had to do when television came along. It serves no good purpose for any of us to clutch our newsletters and magapapers and cast aspersions on this new medium darling of the communication world. Better to start down the so-called Superhighway than dawdle and wind up as road-kill.

No matter how cold you may feel to this cool new medium, it is indisputable that print suddenly has some serious competition. Nothing printed will ever be instantaneous and global. Nor can its audience give immediate feedback. Nor can you get a real-time detailed log of who's hitting what pages, where they came from and how long they stayed.

Print publishers must simply digest the web and re-focus on what print does best...such as placing mirrors and filters in front of the world so that readers can see it with context and perspective.

It is also indisputable that the role of the communicator (and a whole lot of other professions) have been turned upside down. We communicators no longer have the luxury of simply crafting messages that mold opinion and elicit action. Now we must also help invent the medium the messages are being delivered on. It is as if the architect had to draw the blueprint and then put in the plumbing. The problem is, with all this fuss over the network, browsers, bandwidth and protocols, who's minding the message? Now everybody's a communicator. Oh, what a tangled web we have woven.

The good news is that the communicator's role and potential contribution to an organization is greatly expanded. By helping invent the medium, the communicator can help sort out the good, bad and ugly from a virtual universe of New Media stuff. Just because we now have the tool to push 50 info-channels to employee desktops does not mean that this makes any business sense. As new and dazzling communication possibilities come along — from real-time chats to 3-D animation to virtual reality — the communicator can help digest and feed back valuable insight to the developer, who can then come up with even better technology. And on and on.

The bad news is that old media never dies, and since most corporate web sites and intranets are still garage operations manned by people with "real" jobs, we all must work a lot harder these days, and probably for not much more pay.

Which undoubtedly explains why a lot of good communica-

tors have been sitting under the shade tree next to the Information Superhighway waiting for the dub-dub-dub-dot-com-hype to subside. They see the Internet as a lot more work, and since most of their audience isn't wired anyway, why not wait it out?

The only problem with this strategy is that if we communicators don't jump in and help invent the medium as well as the messages, who will? One of the reasons why so many web sites are so bloated, confusing and shallow with no center is that communicators were not sitting in front of the screen along with the techies.

With or without us, an army of technologists and entrepreneurs are piecing together an amazing new ether-world that promises to transform the way we live, work, shop, gamble, invest, learn, entertain ourselves and even have sex — all with amazing efficiency. This conjures up the scary vision of people spending their days lazing in their homes, with the only traffic outside those brown trucks delivering the merchandise they have ordered over the Net.

Of course this is only a virtual pipe dream at this point. Those of us actually trying to do this Internet stuff every day are much

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like the poor gold miner slogging through the muck to find that little nugget. The Superhighway Strike is an illusive fantasy, always over the next cyber-horizon. And deep down we know the real gold will go to guys like Bill Gates anyway.

Those of us in Camp Intranet are mired down with much more mundane concerns, like justifying employee web access to cynical managers, writing and enforcing intranet policies and publishing standards, and building brick-by-brick a truly information-rich and user-friendly internal web...intranet dial-tone. This is an immensely large, complex and time-consuming task. We are only beginning to bite into this elephant we have to swallow. After three years of toiling on my own little intranet outpost, I have reached these conclusions, all debatable, of course:

No one person, department or profession does the Internet. Internet projects are by definition multi-departmental, multi-disciplinary team efforts. Three skills are crucial — communication, technical and design — but resources must also be tapped from marketing, HR, legal, finance, advertising and the library, to name a few. There's never been a better time to take someone new to coffee or lunch.

It's very easy to get hooked on the technology. Timothy Leary saw computers as the New Drug, and I think he was on to something. Since cyberspace in some respects is like visiting another planet, it's not surprising that some people escape and overdose on computer games and chat rooms. There's also real allure to working on the front edge of new technology. Figuring out how to deploy new Net tools such as BackWeb and Net Meeting is a

lot more fun than writing another chairman's report to the stock-holders. The trick is to keep one eye on the technology while keeping your seat in the chair, crafting good content and intuitive navigation to it. Internet hype is everywhere. Discount everything by at least 50 percent.

The Internet blurs everything. Whose home page is it when it contains content from a dozen divisions of the company? Who's responsible for setting and enforcing Internet policy in an organization? The HR department? Computer Security? Corporate Communication? Management? What's the professional communicator's role when everyone's a communicator? How about facilitator, mediator, translator or simply project manager? Sometimes the role most needed is Turf Referee.

Sometimes it's all a bit much. I'm undoubtedly biased, but I consider the Internet to be the mother of all corporate projects, the largest team-project ever. But every Internet project has amazing scope and complexity, wearing detail, huge ramifications and therefore, sticky politics. The task is even more difficult because everything is new and everything is rush (1 web year = close to 2.5 months). Unfortunately, playing Master-of-the-World Wide Web day in and day out takes its toll. Some days even the word Internet makes you tired.

Technology is not the hardest part. Human beings are. Because Internet technology poses a huge re-engineering potential on the work place, there's tremendous inertia to overcome before every new streamlining advance is put in place. At least as many meetings are needed to figure out the human paradigm shifts as are needed to figure out how the hardware and software installs. The trick is to skate to where the puck is headed — and not talk every new technology to death.

Learn the language. The Internet has its own vocabulary, and there are certain acronyms, protocols, terms and slang that you should be able to hear without having your eyes glaze over. For instance, 128-bit encryption, client/server architecture, data mining, legacy systems, whiteboard, push technology, dynamic

pages, frames, server side includes, ISDN, jpeg, SAP, and SQL Servers. Java and cookies, anyone?

Don't judge the Internet by what you see today. As incredible an invention as the networked computer is, the so-called Superhighway is really a rutted dirt road with lots of go-slow zones and detours to nowhere. We are about where television was in the 1950s — at the test-pattern stage — waiting for some good programs to come on. At this point, there's still a lot of hoopla about very little great content. But as the computer, telephone and TV converge, couch potatoes undoubtedly will never be the same.

The Net already has affected traditional media in mighty ways. *Wired* magazine looks like the web it reports on. Some web sites are spin-offs of television programs, and some television programs are spin-offs of web sites. On the print side, the firehose of information gushing from the Net means no one has the luxury of writing long anymore, except novelists. New-Media sensitive newspapers, newsletters and magazines are now compressing articles with about the same ratio as the latest Internet software compresses audio and video files. (Thus I wonder how many people will read to the end of this 2,000-word article.) Does this mean the end of serious thought?

Strive to be simply brilliant. The Internet has spawned terrible complexity. Every next step requires questioning old ways, defining new requirements, finding owners, getting the budget, settling on a timetable and doing a pilot. "Do you want the hack, or do you want us to do it right?" This was the question posed by one of our resident gurus recently. "The hack is about $10,000; doing it right will cost $150,000," he added, making it a no-brainer. When it comes to web work, favor action over discussion. Execute simple first steps. Too much talk guarantees inaction. It's not like print, where mistakes live forever. You can change the web site tomorrow. Expect order to eventually come out of chaos. Do the hack.

Content is still king. With the glut of confusing information coursing through the Net daily, thoughtful, well-crafted and designed communication has never been more needed. Which is why print — and we trust, communicators — won't go away.

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