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Perspectives

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World Wide Worries

Not everybody is aware of Internet laws, and it should be the responsibility of our service providers to make sure we understand them

Be careful next time you sign onto your beloved Internet. The police might bust down your door. A University student recently achieved a dubious distinction by being the first person in the nation to be convicted for distributing copyrighted software on the Internet. Without realizing it, some University members may be involved in the same illegal activity because they aren't aware of existing Internet laws. Because of the nature of Internet use, service providers should be responsible for making available all pertinent information.

Jeffrey Gerard Levy, a computer and information science major, pleaded guilty to a felony count of copyright infringement via the Internet under the No Electronic Theft act. The law passed in 1997 to fix a loophole that left it legal to distribute free copies of copyrighted materials, as Levy did. Though it is unknown if Levy had prior knowledge of wrongdoing, the lesson of informing users of legal matters remains the same.

Levy is expected to receive probation, but the maximum penalty for the crime is three years in prison and a \$250,000 fine. That's a lot to think about next time you hit the connect button on your Web browser. And chances are, not many on campus are aware of the law.

It is the connect button that offers the best chance to inform citizens about ever-changing Internet laws. Because it is a conscious choice for people to connect to the Internet and a very concerted effort to establish one's Web site, there are ample opportunities that Internet providers are equipped to furnish their users. The provider should be responsible for offering a listing of applicable laws that pertain to the users' needs for each step — from ser-

vice agreements for basic service, to registering a Web account with a site.

While some smaller amounts of responsibility are laid at the feet of other oversight groups — and of course the users themselves — there is no other group with the inherent opportunities as the service providers are.

Alternatives, such as rigid government oversight or a total laissez-faire policy, leave much to be desired. The government would be one of those options, but history repeatedly shows that a slowly reacting bureaucracy is no match for crafty and maneuverable opponents, and there is no more swift or dexterous group today than Internet pirates. And nobody wants to create a full-time Big Brother for a revolutionary medium often touted for its ability to increase the democratic flow of ideas.

And if anyone needed proof that users don't always act responsibly on their own, they can look to Gerard as their evidence. There are plenty of opportunities for stu-

dents and others to break the law on the Internet since the technology is so readily available on campus.

With every student and faculty member on campus having Internet capability, there are innumerable opportunities for missteps over the copyright infringement line. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that many who use computers on campus have ethernet connections, a pirate's dream. With the blazing speeds offered by ethernet, a person, with legal intentions or otherwise, can rack up violations at a much faster rate.

The University's Internet access lists all of its rules on fair use of its facilities, such as respecting copyrights, restraining from interference in computing activities and that students are held to the same defamation laws that govern any other form of publication. While the University has made the statements relatively easy to find, there is a possibility students are not being informed of the rules and consequences re-

garding their actions on-line.

There is no doubt that there will be increased scrutiny of on-line copyright infringement as software companies worldwide lost revenues of \$11 billion in 1998 and usage of the Internet continues to grow. And with increased scrutiny of behavior comes the reality that students and faculty must have the opportunity from their service providers to be made aware of existing laws.

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board. Responses may be sent to ode@oregon.uoregon.edu.

CORRECTION

The "Business school's new dean brings fresh ideas, goals" story (ODE, Sept. 28), should have said that Dean Philip Romero said he believes a new business facility is necessary to break the University into the list of the top 50 business schools.



Giovanni Salimena Emerald