Traffic Jam Ahead??? 
A commentary by Dean Lance Query

At the present time, there’s congestion on the on ramp of the information superhighway! Michigan users of the Internet have discovered that their previously easy access has become an increasingly complicated and frustrating encounter—especially if they are in certain geographical locations. The local dial-in lines, which appear to be free to users, actually have been provided via MichNet, a network developed by Merit Network, Inc. This access road has members or affiliates from organizations in education, research, industry, and government. Western Michigan University is such a member. When first established, the local dial-in lines were paid for by the member organizations who readily published their numbers. The result, as more and more people access the Internet, is a rapidly growing “pile up” of phone signals that are jamming the local lines. Thousands of users, many not affiliated with the owners of the lines, have taken advantage of the seemingly “free” service. The number of busy signals that now results when anyone dials the local number(s) has left everyone in a negative mood. One answer, more lines, is not a viable one for most organizations including Western Michigan University. The reason is simple: more lines would increase the cost, continue to motivate the non-affiliated users, and further exacerbate the dial-in congestion.

In response to this critical issue, Merit established a Dial-in Access Committee that, in December 1994, produced a new Dial-in Access Policy that would replace the ad hoc practices previously used. The new policy, approved by the Merit Board, attempts to strike a balance between providing reasonable assurance of access to those who help pay for MichNet’s dial-in services while still providing an equitable amount of public, shared access. The policy became fully operational on August 1, 1995. As of that date, all users must have an identifying Access ID in order to connect to network resources over the MichNet dial-in lines. Anyone who continues to use the general “anonymous@merit.edu” identifier will not be able to connect to the network.

Member organizations of the Network are able to provide public access through one of two ways: (1) by buying Access IDs from Merit for users and (2) by obtaining “simultaneous access tokens” (SATs) from Merit and then issuing Access IDs to users. Western Michigan University is using the second method. SATs are “software” units that keep count of active dial-in connections to each organization. Each SAT is “owned” by a member organization and permits that organization’s constituency to use MichNet shared dial-in modems anywhere in the State of Michigan. An organization can obtain or “earn” SATs by providing shared dial-in (i.e., modems) access to the network. The more modems provided by an organization, the more SATs are earned, with the result that more “access” is available.

An important advantage of the implementation of the new approach to public access to the information highway is that it offers a way to give priority to users. Members of the WMU community who dial in to a modem with Access IDs provided by the University get top priority not only “at home” in the Kalamazoo area, but from any location in the state where WMU has provided modems. If organizations choose not to purchase and place modems off-site, their users can still dial-in to listed modems. However, the user then becomes one of several “drivers” in the shared dial-in “on ramp” that would connect to the network. They may well find themselves “jammed” until their organization decides to “pay the toll,” purchase SATs, and assure full-speed ahead onto the highway. However, in order to make access possible, those organizations that are not official members of Merit may still purchase Access IDs and so can individuals. The anticipated result is significant reduction in dial-in congestion; in other words, no busy signals or traffic jams.

Having outlined a solution to a complex problem in today’s computerized world does not, however, eliminate at least one other key concern: Does the Dial-In Access Policy widen the gap between the information “haves” and the “have nots”? The answer to that question is, unfortunately, “yes and no!” All of us need to be reminded that the access to the superhighway was never “free” although it appeared to be to the average user. Moreover, many of the users already had to have made a considerable investment in personal computing equipment before attempting to connect to the network. The new policy is not penalizing those who have already shown that they can pay. Further, in responding to those who were always “have nots,” but were not paying prior to this, it must be pointed out that if access is a busy signal, the user becomes a “have not” regardless of the system’s capabilities.

At the same time, the fact is that many institutions including libraries and schools, whose mission is to provide information access, will not be able to afford Merit’s dial-in access equipment and maintenance charges. Already, discussions are underway among members of the Lakeside Library Consortium regarding its future role as a broker for Merit’s services. The Library of Michigan, our state library, is also attempting to resolve the issue of funding for library access. Until such planning is completed, there remains the possibility that some individuals will not have access; “have nots” will continue to exist.

In addition, Merit has also been attempting to find resources and expand dial-in capabilities throughout Michigan. The K-12 Dial-In Expansion Program is an example of one project. Merit has dial-in service in 37 Michigan cities that provides the necessary modems to access the system at less expense. This means that dial-in access is only a local call for 70% of those who use these high-technology modems; it also means that 30% will not have access locally.

In sum, the information superhighway infrastructure continues to expand at an amazing speed producing a massive reservoir of resources for those who can access the system. As those users continue to grow in number as well as need, the highway has become crowded, congested, and traffic has come to a full stop. Past practices have had to be changed and costs have had to be paid. Many organizations or institutions have responded to the challenge and improved access for their clientele while reducing the possibility of delays or even non-access. As with many other aspects of our technologically-dominated environment, other problems remain to be solved. For more information on issues related to libraries, see MichNet News, vol. 3, no. 2 (Spring 1995) and Merit/MichNet Shared Dial-in (May 1995).

Lance Query