

# Computer Network Users Attempt a Mutiny

By **Simson L. Garfinkel**

**H**ENRY NIMAN got a bitter taste of the future last month when he began to pay his bills with an electronic banking system and discovered his account had been terminated.

Mr. Niman was an avid user of Prodigy, the fastest-growing computer network in the United States. The system's 650,000 subscribers use it for everything from stock tracking to grocery shopping. Niman learned that the rights he took for granted with the telephone do not apply to the nation's burgeoning electronic networks.

His main use of Prodigy was to send electronic mail to his friends. Unlimited "E-mail" was a founding principle of the system, but this summer the Prodigy Services Company, a joint venture of International Business Machines Corporation and Sears, Roebuck & Company, decided to start charging users who sent more than 30 messages per month 25 cents per message.

Such decisions are Prodigy's right: It's an unregulated, private company.

But Niman felt cheated. He sent out a survey and collected the names of 900 other Prodigy subscribers who felt the same way. He started sending out a private electronic newsletter. Then he started complaining to Prodigy's advertisers. His account went dead shortly thereafter.

Data death.

Niman not only lost access to his bank ac-

count, he also lost the E-mail his friends in San Diego had sent him that pertained to his job as a researcher at the University of Pittsburgh.

Prodigy terminated Niman's account — and the accounts of the 12 other people — because "they violated the member agreement by using harassment and by using the system for purposes for which it wasn't designed," says Steve Heine, a company spokesman. A few weeks later Prodigy rewrote its rules, forbidding customers from sending E-mail to advertisers that does not pertain to orders or products. The company also forbade people from sending out mailings to more than a few users at a time.

"The phone company would have no business telling you that you couldn't call your neighbor to protest a hike in telephone rates," says Marc Rotenberg, director of the Washington-based Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility. But not being a common carrier, Prodigy is free to regulate the content of its network and terminate subscribers as it wishes.

Earlier this year, Prodigy was accused of censorship when it shut down an electronic conference dealing with homosexuality and another one discussing abortion. But Prodigy was merely exercising editorial judgment, says Mr. Heine, putting an end to discussions that had run their course.

In fact, the only thing that Prodigy can't

do is monitor private E-mail between subscribers. That's forbidden by the 1986 Electronic Communications Privacy Act. Niman suspects that the messages he sent advertisers were read by Prodigy's staff. Heine denies that any monitoring took place.

Problems keep arising because services like Prodigy don't neatly fit into any of the legal boxes we've developed over the past hundred years.

Prodigy's on-line news services are a lot like those provided by newspapers, its conferences are like town meetings, and its E-mail like telephone service. All these services are very different, but all are regulated in the same way — not at all.

And there are no alternatives, no competing service where equal access for all is guaranteed and free speech is protected.

Services like Prodigy are large enough that they seem to cross a line between private corporation and public trust. Users assume that their right and freedoms will be respected, then learn otherwise the hard way.

"We've written to the 13 and invited them back," says Prodigy's Heine. "I think that we are being extremely reasonable about it." All the 13 have to do is follow Prodigy's new rules.

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Research under way at several US sites indicates it may be effective for plastics, too. According to Anthony Pometto III of Iowa State University, "Lab studies showed that plastics containing 6 percent starch lost up to 60 percent of their molecular weight in four weeks when they were exposed to the bacteria, temperatures, and moisture they would encounter in compost piles." He is conducting studies at three municipal composts to determine what actually happens and expects results in about one year.

**T**HESE advances seem to make little impression on environmental groups, however. Jeanne Wirka, policy analyst for the Environmental Action Foundation, says, "Biodegradable plastics are so expensive to produce they're not used for commodities. They're almost not worth talking about. The reason plastics are used is that they're cheap, so these are not a replacement for hydrocarbons."

As an example of those costs, ICI Ltd., which manufactures PHB under the name Biopol, says the product currently costs about \$15 per pound, compared with about 50 cents per pound for polyurethane, and about \$1.10 per pound for PET — the plastic used for soft drink bottles. That cost is expected to drop to \$2 to \$3 per pound when ICI goes into larger scale production in about three years.

But even if price were not an

# A Business Guru's Advice to Nonprofit Groups

business executives do in later years: retiring from the relatively Girl Scouts, and an art museum. Never mind that he sometimes views laced throughout this book. "There is nobody clever enough