

# A dim view of Outlook

Microsoft's new e-mail system lures users with nifty features, but nasty surprise awaits / **Simson L. Garfinkel**

**D**OES MICROSOFT Corp. own my e-mail? This is a question that I've been asking myself more and more over the past week, ever since I took the plunge and switched from Qualcomm's Eudora e-mail system to Microsoft's newly released Outlook Express. Included as part of Internet Explorer 4.0, Outlook Express is a slick, sophisticated e-mail program designed from the ground up to work with the Internet. Outlook Express downloads e-mail faster than any other e-mail client I've tried. It has sophisticated search capabilities for finding individual messages long after they have been filed away, and it's pretty enjoyable to use.

Outlook Express also has some nifty data-migration features. The first time you run the program, Express sniffs around your computer's hard drive to see what e-mail program, if any, you happen to be already using. Once it has identified your current e-mail program, Express will offer to import your Internet account settings, your address book, and all of your e-mail messages into Express itself.

This importing feature, combined with Outlook Express's price — free — practically guarantees that a lot of people will give it a good look. And the program's

nice features assure that those same people might try it for a few days or a few weeks.

But if you decide you don't like Outlook Express, you're in for a nasty surprise: There is no easy way to get your saved, new e-mail back out of Outlook Express and into Netscape Communicator or Eudora. In a way, the Outlook Express data migration features are a lot like those spiked tire prongs at parking lots. Danger! Reversing course will cause damage to your data.

Eric Berman, program manager for Outlook Express at Microsoft, says it would have been nice to have exporting back to Eudora and Netscape, but, frankly, it is not a priority. He says that Express is already breaking new ground with its importing features: The competitor's programs don't even go that far.

To be fair, Outlook Express does let you export your e-mail to Microsoft Outlook (part of the Office 97 suite), from which you can export your mail messages to a text file. But that's a cumbersome, multistep approach that leaves your data as a dead text file. The process also strips your mail headers. There is no way to get your e-mail back into Eudora or Netscape — at least, no way that Microsoft will tell you.

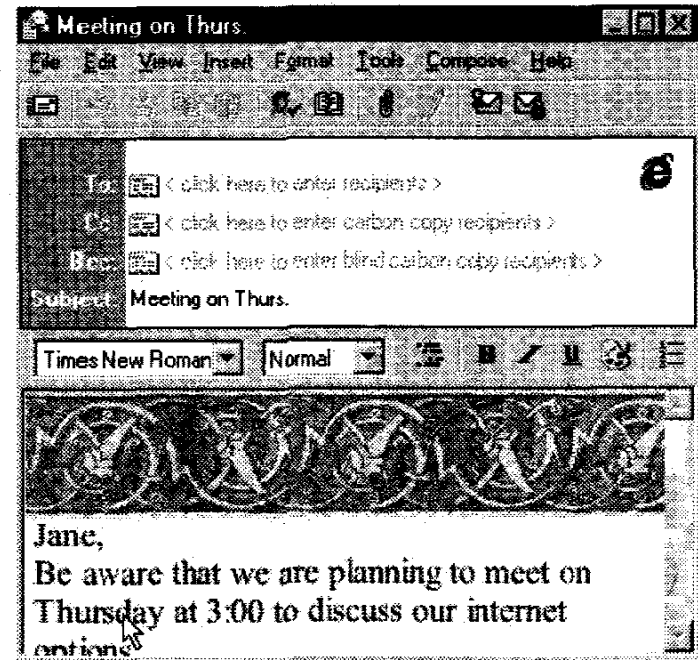
Things get worse if you dig a little deeper. Although it is true that neither Netscape nor Eudora

offer import and export features, at least they both store your e-mail in the standard mailbox format that has been used by e-mail programs since the early 1980s. Outlook Express uses a similar format, but with gratuitous and incompatible changes. The result is that a "power user" (how I hate that term) can move e-mail messages between Navigator and Eudora by simply copying files and renaming a few extensions, but you actually have to get a computer programmer to write you a fancy conversion program if you want to move your e-mail messages from Outlook Express back to one of the other programs.

This is a big deal. For many people, the value of the information stored in their e-mail messages far exceeds the cost of their software and the computer on which it's running. Unfortunately, many people are likely to get sucked into the world of Outlook Express, use it for a while, and then discover that, like me, Microsoft owns their messages and won't let them regain control.

Policies like these become "Exhibit A" for Microsoft-haters.

A few weeks ago, I wrote a column in which I said people use Microsoft Word because it is the best word processor on the market. About a dozen people wrote saying they hate Microsoft Word, and only use it because everybody in their office does. These people need a word processor that is absolutely compatible with Word, and the only way to guarantee such compatibility is by using the same program. Compatibility is something that is very difficult for other software vendors to guaran-



Microsoft's Outlook Express e-mail system makes it difficult to move messages into Netscape Communicator or Qualcomm's Eudora.

tee, because Microsoft closely guards its file formats for Word and other programs.

A simple solution would be to require Microsoft to divulge its file formats for programs like Outlook Express and Word as a precondition to selling the programs in the US market and receiving copyright protection for them. Such a large part of our nation's economy now depends upon these programs that it is easy to argue that such a regulation would be in the public interest. It would help stimulate competition in an increasingly monopolistic marketplace. And, of course, such a rule would not apply just to Microsoft, but to every seller of mass-market computer software.

A lot of libertarians, who seem to be disproportionately represented in the computer industry, cringe at government regulation.

Carpenters and plumbers surely felt the same way when the first building codes were developed. After all, a person should have the right to build any kind of house he or she wants, right? People get what they pay for; let the buyer beware. Fortunately, sounder minds prevailed. The result is a city that is safer for everybody.

As we now embark on building the cyberspace cities of the 21st century, it's important to keep these lessons of the 19th century in mind. The free market doesn't always produce the best results. Some regulation is necessary for the public's best interest. Microsoft should hear the will of the people: Let my data go.

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