

DECLARE E-MAIL INDEPENDENCE

This past March, I started getting dozens of e-mails from upset but resigned AT&T Broadband customers. All said more or less the same thing: their e-mail addresses were about to stop working. I had to update my address book to change the letters after the @ sign from “mediaone.net” to “attbi.com.”

More than 630,000 AT&T customers were forced to make this change. They could have used the occasion to simply and inexpensively assert their electronic individuality and independence. Instead, the majority behaved like good sheep and did what they were told: moved from one mega-corporate address that they didn't own to another. Baa-a-a-a! Baa-a-a-a!

Few people realize just how much control over the increasingly pervasive medium of e-mail they have tacitly conceded. Many, for instance, think that they somehow own their e-mail addresses. Wrong! Legally and technically, the company, university or individual who owns the computer systems behind an e-mail address controls all aspects of the accounts it serves. In fact, the addresses belong to the company whose name comes after the @. (In the case of mediaone.net, AT&T relinquished the name to another Media One, an advertising agency in Sioux Falls, SD, to settle a lawsuit.)



You may think you're entitled to an e-mail address because you've religiously paid some Internet service provider your monthly subscription fee for years. That's not the case. Your provider can cancel your e-mail account for any reason and bounce your e-mail. Or it can give your username—and your e-mail!—to somebody else. Or it can lock you out of your account and read your e-mail without your permission. (Having owned a small Internet service provider since 1995, I know well the responsibilities and dilemmas that come with this awesome power.)

In one case that I know, a person had used the same corporate e-mail address for both his business and personal communications for several years. This seemed reasonable—after all, he had cofounded the company. But he was fired in a power struggle, and the new president decided to read all the personal e-mail that kept trickling into this fellow's account. This was all perfectly legal: the company's computer policy explicitly said that e-mail messages were the property of the business and could be read by management for any reason. In another instance, a friend lost her Internet account after she got into an argument with the firm providing her Internet service. But rather than canceling her username, the provider simply changed her password. Mail to her old address accumulated for months, unread. People who send messages to her old address still get the response that her mailbox is full.

E-mail is tremendously different from the two other addressing systems that we use routinely—postal addresses

and telephone numbers. Because postal addresses are covered by a huge body of regulations and laws, and because most are linked to physical locations, they work pretty much the way we expect them to. If you move, the U.S. Postal Service will forward mail to your new residence. It will not, however, forward the mail from your old place of work to a new one, even if you ask extra nicely; that's the job of the business.

Telephone numbers, on the other hand, are increasingly regarded by law as the property of the person or organization to which they connect. In fact, the 1996 U.S. Telecommunications Act specifically requires telephone companies to create a framework for telephone number portability, so that businesses and residences can switch phone service providers without losing their phone numbers.

But the Telecommunications Act was silent on the subject of e-mail addresses. The U.S. Congress didn't think to mandate e-mail address portability. It didn't even mandate the next best thing—e-mail forwarding. If you are an America Online user and decide that you want to switch to another

Most e-mail users behave like sheep, moving from one corporate address that they don't own to another. But there's a simple solution to address portability: get your own domain name.

Internet provider, the only thing you can do is send mail to all of your correspondents, telling them of your new address. AOL will not forward your mail.

What's so distressing about this state of affairs is that there is a simple solution to the problem of e-mail address portability. Every person and every company should get a unique domain name.

Recall that the domain name is the part of the e-mail address after the @ sign. Years ago there were attempts by the Internet's inventors to limit the proliferation of names for technical reasons—people were worried that there might be too many of them. As a result, domain names were made expensive. But those days are long gone. Nowadays you can get your own domain name for less than \$25 a year from any of a number of companies. And these names are portable—that is, you can take them with you from one Internet service provider to another.

Of course, people are taught to be sheep for a reason. Customers tied to @attbi.com or @aol.com addresses are inhibited from switching to a rival service provider—which ultimately means that the companies don't have to compete as hard. That's why neither AT&T nor AOL has worked to make it easy for customers to have their own domains.

In the 21st century, having your own domain name is simple electronic self-defense. Alas, many people find it easier to be sheep. ■