Instant Messaging

From almost its start at America Online in the 1990s, instant messaging was popular. When AOL opened its messaging system to non-AOL users in 1996, growth became explosive and inspired competition. Hundreds of millions now use AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) and competitor systems.

At first, popularity among teenagers helped fuel growth in instant messaging, and young people still are a major portion of the users. But adults also found it a convenient way to connect with family members and friends. Corporations too are adopting internal instant messaging systems to facilitate employee communication. One source estimates corporate users will soon reach 180 million persons, who will send nearly two trillion messages a year.

The appeal of instant messaging is its "instant" aspect: Communication is almost instantaneous. E-mail waits in a queue on a mail server, causing delays, whereas instant messages are transmitted in near real-time. Ease of use is also an advantage: The user need only identify the recipient, type in text, and click "send."

Competition spurred new features. Major competitors included ICQ ("I Seek You")—which debuted in 1996 but was purchased in 1998 by AOL—Microsoft's Messenger and Yahoo. Features beyond one-on-one text messaging include the capability to communicate in groups (chat rooms), transfer data files, leave text messages for later viewing, send e-mails and receive current stock market information.

Most instant message services are offered free. Systems designed for internal corporate use charge fees. A few others, such as Trillian Pro from Cerulean Studios, charge a fee but offer important privacy and compatibility advantages, such as encryption of messages, that is not available with freeware.

Free, easy and instant make instant messaging seem very attractive, but it has its limits and hazards. In most systems, you can communicate only with persons in your "buddy list," and in some that person must give his or her consent for you to list them. Your friends can receive messages instantly only if they are online.

Another limitation is the incompatibility of different messaging systems. In the past, users of the various instant messenger services weren't able to communicate with others. Providers of the service seemed unwilling to reduce their perceived competitive edge by allowing compatibility. Change has begun, however, both in efforts to achieve standardization and in the nascence of programs like Trillian Pro with a "bridge" feature that permits messaging between different systems.

Security and privacy hazards also exist. The contents of messages are less secure than e-mails. The file transfer feature creates a risk that a virus-infected file will be received. Users in some systems are subjected to unsolicited messages, often called "spim" rather than "spam" to reflect the IM abbreviation for instant messaging. Many IM programs call for user profile information, which can then be accessed by others.

Perhaps most troubling is the exposure of minors to unsupervised communication. Like chat rooms on AOL and Internet Relay Chat, instant messaging allows children to reveal private information about themselves and to be contacted by adults. Carelessness also can result in accepting infected files that can crash a family computer.

Parents should be involved in setting up messaging accounts to ensure that their children have not inappropriately revealed personal information in their user profiles. Parents can ensure that the selected IM system either doesn't offer chat room access or that this option is disabled. Parental involvement also can extend to helping children understand how to use the system prudently, checking the "buddy list" for suitability and, if available on the selected software, reading message logs.

Questions or tips about the Internet? E-mail them to sidebar@cox.net.

INSTANT MESSAGING INFORMATION

• **www.instantmessagingplanet.com—**
Information site that reports on how companies use instant messaging and associated technologies. Includes reviews of IM products and services.

• **www.viewz.com/features/imguide.shtml—**
Primer on IM for the personal user.

IM PROVIDERS
• **www.aim.com—**AOL Instant Messenger
• **www.icq.com**   • **messenger.yahoo.com**
• **messenger.msn.com**

Hon. Jefferson Lankford
is a judge on the Arizona Court of Appeals, Division 1.