

# The Internet war

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Net users have now launched their own personal wars on the Internet. They are flooding various sites with their opinions, beliefs and philosophies and in the initial days of the crisis, hackers and virus throwers threatened the cyberworld but sanity prevailed and not much damage was done. At this point, however, debates, forwards, mudslinging, threats, and long sermons, many of them with a touch of humor, are now growing out of proportion.

Tragically, sometimes genuine points of view and ideas are lost in the insane messages and forwards. There is no denying the fact that the Internet has become a platform where people can vent their anger. But at the same time, it is being used as a vehicle to disseminate wrong and distorted disinformation.

E-mailing of forwards was a favorite of Net users from the early days. In the words of a Net expert, "Forwards reflect a sense of comradeship between Net users irrespective of their geopolitical, social and economic realities."

Today, when a surfer comes across anything which is even remotely connected to the present crisis, he considers it his moral duty to share it with other Net users and as a result starts clicking addresses from his address books. Just last week, one of the forwards in my inbox had 150 addresses. Imagine the pain and trouble the forwarder undertook.

Every Net user will find many forwards in their mailboxes. Most of the users have now started deleting those forwards even without reading them and as a result some genuine and thought-provoking ideas are

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also trashed.

There are people who have managed to retain their sense of humor, and try to ease the tension and bitterness with their humorous mails, which sometime carry very subtle caricatures. Subjects of such mails are normally US President George Bush, FBI, New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, Osama bin Laden, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. However, sometimes such caricatures and jokes cross the boundaries of decency and are too inflammatory in nature.

Many forwards, however, are very meaningful and thought provoking. For example, when the United States launched an attack on Afghanistan a group of moderate intellectuals put their ideas to work. This mail became instantly popular and evoked interest among the Net users. Even news agencies picked up that mail.

Recently an article by a Pakistani bureaucrat Husain Haqqani and one by Khaled Al-Maena on the present crisis has sparked quite an interest on the Internet. Haqqani and Al-Maena's articles were forwarded on various web-based e-mails. One of the Net users in Canada forwarded Al-Maena's feature to many e-mail addresses in the Kingdom.

But when mails such as the one on the predictions of Nostradamus start flooding into mailboxes, then the users start ignoring and trashing them. The worst scene, however, is at the chat sites. Prior to Sept. 11 attack, most of the chats revolved around romance and flirts. Now that has gone. Chatters are looking for targets on which

they could pour their venom and vent their anger. Be it American, Westerner, Christian or Arab, Asian and Muslim. Yahoo, MSN, ICQ, Indiatimes and many other chat sites are the arenas for fights.

Prior to Sept. 11, the first question on any chat sites was: "a/s/l please," meaning "What is your age, sex and location?" But today this question has been replaced by: "What is your opinion on the present crisis?" The hidden meaning behind the question is which camp do you belong to? There is no reason or logic behind the arguments put forth by chatters. It appears that they enjoy their irrationality and their sole purpose is provoking people with other points of view. If one chatter ridicules Osama bin Laden then the supporter of other groups will ridicule American leaders. Lines are clearly drawn on such sites between pro- and anti-America groups. Chatters admit that their behavior in chat rooms is completely irrational and sometimes crosses the limits of human decency.

"Rationality is not an answer to irrationality," said Inspirer, a chatter on the ICQ who claims that in normal life his approach is different to the crisis. "It is fun out there. Maybe what I say in a chat room, I don't mean in real life," said "cooldude," a frequent visitor on Yahoo's Pakistan chat.

A few sites have now started throwing chatters out if they insult religions. But such an attempt will not put a stop to a slow polarisation of Net users nor will it end religious, regional and social biases and prejudices. Aren't these biases inherent in human nature and aren't they the root cause of all the problems including the present one?