



## Web Watcher

By Glenn Fleishman

# Is the Internet a self-correcting mechanism?

**The hype** surrounding the hype surrounding the Internet has made it into all kinds of animals: sometimes a terrible fanged beast that will devour our children, sometimes a cure for everything that ails us as a society.

Here's one thing it is that you don't see discussed at all: it's a self-correcting mechanism, sort of like those very expensive watches that use extra flywheels and balances to keep the time true.

Certainly the Internet has lots and lots of bad information on it—unchecked facts, incomplete data, opinions masquerading as analysis, text desperately in need of an editor. That's an inevitable consequence of so many people having "authorial" access. But, as the medium begins to mature, its broad accessibility and plasticity have given rise to a counter-trend: a new way information can be continuously refined and improved.

A demonstration of this is the Internet Movie Database, or IMD, based in Cardiff, Wales (the URL is <http://www.cs.cf.ac.uk/Movies/>, but they prefer U.S. Internauts to use a stateside mirror at <http://www.msstate.edu/Movies/>.) The IMD, which just celebrated its fifth anniversary, began as an attempt to assemble a definitive and comprehensive listing of movies and their details—cast, director, and all sorts of other information. It also records various people's ratings of the films.

On my first look at it in mid-1994, it seemed like a hodgepodge of mistakes and grammatical errors. I thought it might become exhaustive, but never authoritative. Boy, was I wrong.

What the IMD folks did absolutely right was provide excellent feedback mechanisms for users of the database. Since the users number in the tens (maybe hundreds) of thousands now, the feedback on errors is constant and profoundly effective.

Look at this magazine in your hands. A staff of about a dozen plus a couple dozen contributors

and writers assemble this publication, which is read by some 600,000 people. If there's an error in the publication, it's likely some percentage of readers will notice, and some smaller percentage will send E-mail, a letter, or even an exhaustively annotated article (don't ask).

However, we can't reprint the publication and mail it to all subscribers. So the best any print publication can do is add the information to its in-house institutional knowledge and—if it's important—print a very short correction in a future issue.

If an error appears in the Internet Movie Database, though, it's likely that several people will report it (depending on how obscure it is), and the folks running it in Wales, who evaluate all suggested corrections, can make the change to the database. Instantly, the correction is available to all users.

The question still remains, though:

Who decides what's authoritative? The answer is often reference books. Though it's a violation of the law to copy information verbatim from any published source, it is certainly acceptable to develop information independently and confirm it through a variety of sources. This is sort of how dictionaries work: citations of new or changed usage are collected from published and other sources.

This model is what all online information sources, whether Web-based or otherwise, should strive to achieve: having mechanisms in place that bring them closer and closer to perfection, rather than relying on the first approximation of it. Print publications have the advantage of mass distribution and high-quality graphics and type; but online systems, magazines, and databases have the advantage of constant refinement until some kind of Platonic ideal of Perfect Knowledge may be reached.

### Perfect shopping

Speaking of perfect knowledge, this has a very specific meaning in marketing. If you can know every vendor's price for something you want to buy, you possess perfect knowledge of the price. Since so many goods and services are available on the Internet, Andersen Consulting came up with an interesting experiment.

At <http://bf.cstar.ac.com>, you'll find a deceptively simple area to enter the name of a musical artist and the title of the compact disc you're looking for. The agent they've written then goes out on the Web, searches the major online CD stores, and returns a summary of pricing.

Andersen clearly labels this an experiment in how sellers and buyers will get together in the future; already, three stores have locked out their agent. However, an agent language called Java will soon be in wide use. With it, you could theoretically run a small program from your own machine to accomplish the same task—and it'll be fascinating to see how online merchants respond when anyone can quickly and easily window-shop across the entire Net.

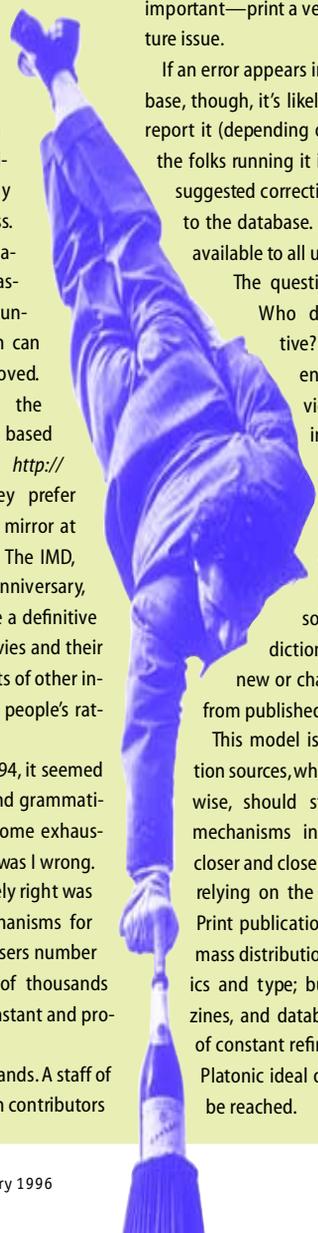
### A few cool tidbits

**Reason #1,303,891:** Buzz out—way out—on the new Levi's site at <http://www.levi.com> ([www.levi.com](http://www.levi.com) is something much stranger). Yes, you must use Netscape Navigator, but it's worth it.

**Cheapest shingle on the Web.** America Online and Prodigy now offer subscribers the tools to build their own individual Web pages as part of the basic fee (and CompuServe has announced its intention to do the same). With megabytes of storage available (especially on AOL, where each screen name gets its own storage area), you can set up a shingle for a few dollars a month—a far cry from the thousands of dollars required for commercial sites, and it puts you on almost the same footing with them.

**Resistance is futile.** Trying to announce your site to the world at large? Try Submit-It (<http://www.submit-it.com>), a free service that lets you automatically submit entries to a number of Internet indexes, crawlers, and spiders.

*Contributing Editor Glenn Fleishman, a principal at Point of Presence Company, can be reached at [glenn@popco.com](mailto:glenn@popco.com). His column "Web Watcher" appears in each issue of Adobe Magazine.*





Contents of this file and the entire contents of this CD © 1996 Adobe Systems Incorporated, all rights reserved.

Adobe, the Adobe logo, Acrobat, Acrobat Capture, Acrobat Catalog, Acrobat Exchange, the Acrobat logo, Acrobat Reader, Acrobat Search, Adobe Caslon, Adobe Dimensions, Adobe Font Folio, Adobe Garamond, Adobe Illustrator, Adobe Jenson, Adobe Magazine, Adobe Originals, Adobe Premiere, Adobe Table, Adobe Type Manager, Adobe Wood Type, After Effects, Aldus, Aldus Magazine, Art Explorer, ATM, Birch, Blackoak, Caflich Script, Charlemagne, Checklist, Classroom in a Book, Classroom in a Box, CoSA, Cottonwood, CustomerFirst, Distiller, Ex Ponto, FaxYI, Frame, FrameMaker, FrameViewer, Galahad, Gallery Effects, Giddyap, Giddyap Thangs, HomePublisher, Ironwood, Jimbo, Lithos, Madrone, Mesquite, Mezz, Minion, Myriad, Nueva, PageMaker, PageMill, Penumbra, Persuasion, PhotoDeluxe, Photoshop, Poetica, Ponderosa, Poplar, PostScript, PSpriinter, Sanvito, ScreenReady, SiteMill, Streamline, SuperATM, SuperPaint, Tekton, TextureMaker, TIFF, Trajan, TypeAlign, Type On Call, Type Reunion, Type Twister, Viva, and WildType are trademarks of Adobe Systems Incorporated or its subsidiaries and may be registered in certain jurisdictions. InfoPublisher is a registered trademark of Page Ahead Software, licensed to Adobe. Macintosh and Power Macintosh are registered trademarks of Apple Computer Inc. Windows is a registered trademark of Microsoft Corporation. Other products and corporate names may be trademarks of other companies, and are used only for explanation and to the owners' benefit, without intent to infringe.

All product pricing and offers represented in *Adobe Magazine* are applicable in the U.S. and Canada only. Prices and availability outside this area may vary; residents of other countries should check with their distributors regarding offers available to them.

**browse**