101 Ways to Save the Internet

By Paul Boutin

Where's a superhero when you need one? The Net, which once seemed so invincible, is under attack by the forces of evil. Viruses knock servers to their knees. Spammers hijack our inboxes. Hackers and identity thieves menace our collective security and personal privacy.

Desperate solutions range from abandoning email to requiring a license to log on. Halt, fools! The Internet's problems stem from the same virtues that make it great: open architecture, the free flow of information, peer-to-peer cooperation, and a bias for linking strangers, not disconnecting them. Take those away and the Net might cease to infuriate us - but it will also cease to amaze us.

Here's a smarter approach: 101 proposals that harness the Net's own superpowers to defeat its foes. Up, up, and away!

1 Unleash vigilante justice on spammers One activist has proposed filters that launch distributed denial-of-service attacks back at spammers. Great. Just make sure we have the right addresses first.

2 Slash song prices charge 29 cents per download. You''ll make it up in volume.

3 Quit already, Jack Valenti

4 Appoint Larry Lessig to the Supreme Court Is he a Democrat or a Republican? Who cares! Laws governing information flow are the new affirmative action, abortion, and gun control rolled into one.

5 Create the all-in-one inbox Email, phone calls, instant messages - they should all go into a single app.

6 Triple our cable modem speed First step: Just turn off the Golf Channel and UPN.

7 Demand truth in advertising for software updates C'mon, AOL 9.0 is really AOL 8.0 with the version number increased 1.0.

8 Declare spammers are terrorists And put Ashcroft, Ridge, and Rumsfeld on their tails.

9 Hands off Internet phone calls Just because the creaky old phone system was regulated to death doesn't mean VoIP should suffer the same fate.

10 Free the handsets We should be able to buy any cell phone and match it with any service plan.

11 Larry Flynt, build a porn browser It should cover our tracks coming and going.

12 Make email addresses portable

13 Don't let the Pentagon hog the airwaves The DOD doesn't need that many civilian-free radio frequencies to do its job.

14 Dump the Digital Millennium Copyright Act

15 Stop the US Patent Office before they patent the hyperlink Oops, too late.

16 Simplify Web publishing Why can't we post files from our desktop to a Web site in one drag-and-drop move?

17 Let a thousand Wi-Fis bloom Open spectrum is the new open source.

18 Build a .sex red-light district Icann, the committee that assigns top-level Internet domains, refuses to create an adult zone that can easily be kept from kids' eyes. Porn won't disappear, so deal with it.

19 Make privacy a personal asset Canada has it already: a law that prevents firms from consolidating all customer information after a merger.

20 Roll out GAAP for geeks Just as with accounting, create an industry standard for network security. Don't forget the penalties for companies that don't comply.

21 Bring on the perp walks We want to see the next CEO whose company's servers leak 10,000 credit card numbers marched past TV cameras by the FBI.

22 Take back UHF We're tired of running our wireless network on the same frequency as the microwave, the cell phone, and the neighbor's baby monitor. Channel 83 is just sitting there.

23 Offer real RIAA amnesty Instead of telling us to delete MP3s or pay a fine, how about you let us pay a fair price to keep them.

24 Release Episode III on the Net It's going straight to video anyway.

25 Pass a White Hat Protection Act Hackers who find holes in corporate networks should get thanks, not handcuffs.

ANTISPAM TOOLBOX
None of these is a magic bullet. But together, they can force junk mail down to levels we can all live with.
Items 26-33

26 Pass the Do Not Spam list Chuck Schumer's Senate bill sticks American inbox bombers with steep fines and creates a special circle in hell for those who send porn

to tots. It's not 100 percent enforceable, but neither is the speed limit on Interstate 80.

27 Automate the FTC Replace the Federal Trade Commission's manual email address for reporting spam (uce@ftc.gov) with a nationwide collaborative filtering service like Cloudmark's SpamNet.

28 Simplify disposable addresses

29 Stop email forgery A geeky feature called Reverse MX makes it impossible to masquerade as gwbush@whitehouse.gov.

30 Scramble archived addresses Online archives of mailing lists are a treasure trove for spammers. Give members the option to have their addresses scrambled in posts.

31 Enable digital signatures Crypto certificates are the most reliable way to tell email friend from faux. ISPs and corporate IT guys should pass them out as a competitive advantage.

32 Build friend-of-a-friend filters Think of it as Friendster for your inbox. Everyone on our list can email everyone on yours, but outsiders have to fill out those annoying SpamCop forms.

33 Create a P2P email program We directly trade MP3 files, instant messages, and now phone calls without the bother of backend servers. So why not email messages?

34 Spyware vs. Spyware Counterspyware shouldn't just find spyware installed on our computers. It should hunt down the punk who put it there.

35 Link Moviefone and Fandango Cut a deal so we don't have to search both your sites for theaters.

36 Allow Wi-Fi roaming The Cloud and Boingo share their hot spots - now how about T-Mobile, Verizon, et al.?

37 End broadband monopolies You can't get DSL without first signing up with the local phone bureaucracy for a line you won't use. This is deregulation?

38 Simplify URLs Why can't http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail//0375502904/qid=1068751824/sr=1 2-8/103-2810600-6302246?v=glance&s=books be amazon/wolf/wired?

39 Upgrade to IPv6 The next-gen Internet protocol will improve security and add 340,282,366,920,938,463,463,374,607,427,473,244,160 IP addresses - enough for everything, ever.

40 Big music, follow the money 8 of 9 adults beyond student age still pay for songs instead of ripping them.

41 Free the archives Require that copyright owners reregister works after 50 years and put everything else up for grabs. The Magic Kingdom gets to keep Mickey Mouse, while archivists can digitize deteriorating unclaimed films without fear of lawsuits.

42 Replace servers with P2P Too many network services - domain names, Web servers, email - rely on the old client-server model, which is vulnerable to attack.

43 Unleash Jeff Bezos, rock star C'mon, Jeff, you can build a better music store than the dude in the black turtleneck or Mr. Bill.

44 Publish Creative Commons for Dummies The open copyright licensing system is pure genius. But you need to be a genius to use it.

45 VeriSign must die

46 Free the Beeb The BBC is dragging its feet on a plan to put its vast archives online. Come on, chaps, it's your best idea since Monty Python.

47 Upgrade phone booths to Wi-Fi

48 Free Rob Glaser! The barrage of pop-ups that clutter the screen when we try to use RealOne can only be a cry for help: Geek guru Glaser is being held hostage by his own marketing department!

49 Mesh networks everywhere If wireless signals could hop from gadget to gadget, we wouldn't have to hunt for hot spots.

50 Add a broadband department to Wal-Mart You've put every local hardware store out of business. How about the cable guy and the phone company next?

51 And while you're at it Bundle a combo PC, DSL-cable modem, and wireless home router for, oh, $299.99.

Microsoft To-Do List
Here are a few suggestions that don't require breaking up the company or shipping Linux.
Items 52-64

52 Hey Steve, fire someone Somebody's not living up to the company's tough talk on fixing bugs. Developers, developers, developers should be accountable, accountable, accountable.

53 Give away a good spam filter

54 Ship antivirus wizard Why can't the paper clip guy tell us something important, like "This message is infected with Sobig"?

55 Block self-installing adware for good

56 Enable automatic file encryption We've heard the promises for years. But even Apple offers this already - what's the holdup?

57 Filter fake error messages Those ads that pose as Windows error messages ("Your computer may be infected! Download fix?") should appear in front of your lawyers, not us.

58 Take the blame Software license agreements that absolve you of, oh, deleting three years' worth of email are irresponsible. Bugs are negligence, and negligence should cost you, not us.

59 Make anonymous Net use easier

60 Make networked home PCs back each other up

61 Create a security advisory board Appoint some outsiders (hello, Dan Geer?) to decide which security upgrades should be auto-pushed to consumers' PCs - then make it happen.

62 Add a low-bandwidth mode to Internet Explorer

63 Offer more language translation We want to read those Iranian blogs.

64 Simplify for security Fewer features means fewer bugs.

65 Establish an ID theft hotline Having your identity stolen is a nightmare, especially the paperwork. Wells Fargo has proposed a one-call service. By sharing and analyzing data, financial services companies could then sort criminals from customers.

66 Shut down pedophile chat rooms Its just a bunch of undercover FBI guys in there anyway.

67 End phone subsidies A byzantine maze of hidden revenue transfers - universal service, excise tax, TTY/TDD access, 911, et cetera - discourages innovations like Vonage that don't fit the regulatory format. Pay for all this stuff from general taxes instead of sneaking it onto the phone bill.

68 Write to President Schwarzenegger When he gets to Washington in, oh, 2012, maybe he can terminate the legislation that mandates insane fixes for digital piracy.

69 Restore due process for ISPs Reverse the legal precedent that requires providers to hand over their customers' names under subpoena - at least until they stop handing over the wrong names.

70 Keep blogging, Howard Dean

71 Add a recall function for email messages Outlook (with Microsoft Exchange Server) does it, why can't everyone else?

72 Install the Slammer Panic button Give operators at top traffic hubs the right to instantly block malicious packets worldwide instead of paging one another - an attack on one is an attack on all.

Google To-Do List
We love you Larry and Sergey, but…
Items 73-78

73 Add a search for legal music downloads

74 Crawl the Internet Archive

75 Let us link to a page we hate without boosting its ranking

76 Add mobile numbers to the phone book

77 Create an email address directory

78 Give us a filter option for blogs

APPLE TO-DO LIST
We've heard the rumors. Now make them true.
Items 79-83

79 iPhone

80 Finding Nemo browser for kids

81 iDVR

82 Safari for Windows

83 iPod for movies

84 Leave all the old eBay auctions online, Meg Imagine the outrage if the NYSE threw that kind of market data away.

85 Archive the Net Brewster Kahle can't do it all by himself.

86 Take over the MPAA, Keanu Only the One can end the war between fans and the movie industry machine.

Your To-Do List
Surf globally, act locally. There are some things you'll just have to do yourself:
Items 87-95

87 Switch your ISP Some offer anti-spam and anti-virus tools and support. If your current provider won't help you defend yourself, find another that will.

88 Change your screen name Is your screen name the same as your email address? Are you getting spam? Duh.

89 Demand privacy reports Push companies to reveal the info they have on you and with whom it has been shared - the privacy version of a credit report.

90 Death to fax machines Send us an attachment instead.

91 Stop with the jokes If we get the one about French military victories one more time, we're going to come over and unplug you personally.

92 Turn off your HTML email It makes you vulnerable to viruses - and bugs us.

93 Don't open it When you get a suspicious-looking email attachment, resist the urge to click.

94 Tell Kelly on Geocities to take down her Macarena tribute page It's over, Kel.

95 Protect yourself, dumbass Download security and virus patches at Microsoft.com/protect.

96 Blanket airports with Wi-Fi There are more Centrino ads than hot spots. How about covering check-in lines, gates, baggage claim, and the restrooms.

97 Celebrate diversity With nearly every computer on the planet running Windows, Outlook, and Explorer, it's too easy for a single virus to spread everywhere.

98 Add a "Skip All Flash Intros" option to Macromedia players

99 Hire Tom Ford to design Dells Just look what he did for Gucci.

100 Dear Mr. President, whatever you're doing to make cybersecurity czars quit, stop it

101 Madonna, the EFF needs you Your "Hollywood" video ripping off, er, paying tribute to photographer Guy Bourdin is the boldest argument for fair use since Warhol.

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