

AOL stands for America's-OutLaw

by Richard Burton, Publisher

If Jesse James were alive today, he'd be working for America Online, the number one Internet mobster. The Wild West is alive and well in AOL land where the burly outlaw barges through saloon doors, pistols drawn, demanding more and more money, betraying the public trust under the guise of sweet promises. It's a wonder that Internet users aren't sitting at their computers with knives embedded in their backs, three letters etched onto the stainless steel blades, A-O-L.

One of the earliest Internet service providers, Arlington, Virginia based AOL merged with Time Warner in 2001. The marriage is in need of some serious counseling. Last year, 75% to 80% of AOL's \$8.2 billion in revenues came from Internet access subscriptions. Quite a chunk of change for so many unsatisfied users. In February of 2006, AOL began taking payments for incoming emails via Goodmail's CertifiedEmail product, which allows AOL as well as Goodmail to charge a per-email fee of approximately a quarter of a cent per email under the guise of protecting the consumer from spam. Strap on the spurs while side-stepping the cow manure, there's more.

Sending a simple email to a close relative has become impossible through AOL. Attaching one single link will most likely block your email, deeming it spam. By implementing this new form of supposed "email screening", AOL threatens the very thing that has attracted so many to Internet mail in the first place, zero cost. It costs 39 cents to mail a letter through the United States Postal Service. Internet Mail has always been free until now. What if other ISPs angered over AOL's recent highway robbery begin demanding ransoms of their own to accept AOL user mail? To dupe users into thinking they are providing an extra service by blocking spam is only a scam to fatten the outlaw's already bulging pockets.

One's mailbox should belong to them, not to the provider. We must remember that we as consumers choose our ISP. How much longer will users allow a dictator to tell them how to conduct their own businesses? AOL should be ashamed. We can no longer afford to trust this lying ISP. It's high time we point the finger at this despicable masked robber, ripping the bandana off of the face that once promised so much. Other smaller ISPs have had to cower beneath AOL, never able to stand up to the giant competition, with all its added benefits, which we now see disguised as half-truths in an effort to squeak another dime from the consumer. AOL choked the life out of many good, small ISPs who were providing a much needed service in a respectable manner. Refusing to stop there, the outlaw went on to pistol whip small businesses,

threatening their service by charging a fee for email.

Free email is not the only freedom to be ripped from AOL users. Threatening freedom of speech has become commonplace with this outlaw. MoveOn.org, a concerned citizens'™ political group unhappy with email fees voiced their concerns in a widely circulated Dear AOL petition, obtaining signatures of 15 million. Anyone attempting to forward the email to an AOL user received a "permanent failure of delivery" message bounce back. AOL was caught red-handed censoring mail. AOL has also been caught censoring websites it deems inappropriate. An award winning sex education site by Dr. Susan Block was shut down. Ironically, AOL cites the First Amendment in maintaining Ku Klux Klan websites. This is eerily reminiscent of the early 1930s when Hitler ordered the closing of sexology institutes before parading millions to the gas chamber. AOL has banned sites on books deemed inappropriate and has strictly policed chat rooms, popping in on conversations with warnings, ready to wash out the mouths of users with a bar of soap. Like a bigoted church lady from the old South, AOL will redirect users to an entertainment site if the keyword "sex" is typed. Breast cancer survivors have been unable to create a profile because the word "breast" was deemed obscene. Many were forced to refer to their disease as "hooter cancer" before quickly changing services.

To add insult to injury, AOL's™ billing practices are horrendous. Double billing is a given if a user has more than one screen name. A call to customer service tells users that nothing can be done and no, it's™ not a mistake, it's™ their policy. AOL refuses to bill its customers through snail mail, only accepting payment via a charge card. It is nearly impossible to cancel the terrible service with false promises of two additional free months. AOL users refer to this endless cycle as "the Seven Circles of Hell", finally escaping the dungeon, only to be tossed right back in. With some luck, several faxes and mailed correspondence, the service can be stopped. AOL refuses to accept cancellations through email. A true criminal, AOL has billed thousands of users for products bought through pop-ups after users clicked the "no thanks" button. The outlaw has blamed it on hackers. Even so, that's™ further proof of faulty security within AOL.

As if charging for Internet mail and censoring wasn't™ enough, surely users will take note of AOL's™ latest sin. The same ISP that pretends to protect users from unwanted spam, AOL recently posted a report on the Internet revealing search terms entered by more than 650,000 of its subscribers, detailing their browsed information. Described by AOL spokesman Andrew Weinstein as "an innocent enough attempt to reach out to the community with new research tools", the searches contained information helping to identify the users, including names, Social Security numbers and local landmarks that the users looked up. Slip up or not, this will be the last straw for many AOL users. Once data gets tied together, as it was in this report, the predator is in the house. The U.S. Department of Justice demanded the same type of data from AOL and

Google back in March. Google refused to hand over the data while AOL complied without batting an eye. A judge later ruled that Google did not have to disclose the information to the Department of Justice, once again proving that AOL does not protect its users.

AOL is now running scared, recently cutting 5,000 jobs in order to save more than \$1 billion. Since 2001, the loss of 12 million subscribers has hit hard and it's about time. Competing more fiercely with Yahoo, Microsoft and Google, AOL will now try to make more money off of advertisers instead of robbing the users blind. Ad revenues are expected to increase more than 30% in the coming year. This month, AOL announced plans to end marketing of its dial-up Internet service as well as plans to provide free email, software and additional services to its broadband customers.

Ten years ago, AOL ruled the Internet. A new sheriff is in town. The ISP bully has finally been taken down. With so many choices of good internet providers who will go the extra mile to protect its users, AOL's falling is no surprise. America's OutLaw threatens free Internet mail, robs its members and censors users' mail and websites. America Online is quickly going offline and none too soon.

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