

CYBERCULTURE

How Do You Slay Today's Goliaths? Using the Internet, of Course.

How one lonely—but determined—warrior bested US West

BY TIMOTHY BROEKER

Entrepreneur Mike O'Connor fired up one of the nine computers stationed in his St. Anthony Park basement and attacked US West recently for what he calls "electronic redlining."

Phone company executives announced in early March that their latest high-speed telephone lines wouldn't be available to a wide swath of central city homes and businesses until at least the year 2000. Suburbanites, meanwhile, would have full access by the year's end.

Hardly a fair deal, thought O'Connor, whose fledgling home-based business depends on widespread availability of the speedy phone lines. Two weeks of online politicking and some 3,000 pestering electronic mail messages later, US West executives bowed to ubiquity and revealed plans to make the technology available to all Twin Cities residents and businesses by February 1996.

"Oh, I had a good ol' time," says the St. Paul native in retrospect. "One of the folks at US West said to me, 'You know, I've never seen a decision go quite so fast, quite so high.'"

O'Connor recruited a powerful alliance of citizens, local businesses and community leaders, along with key lawmakers like Rep. Steve Trimble, chair of the Regulated Industries and Energy committee. The resulting political pressure and public outcry quickly convinced a somewhat reluctant US West to spend the estimated \$3 million to \$4 million required to put central city residents and their suburban counterparts on equal technological footing.

"It was quite spectacular," Trimble says of the two-week saga. "The technology really did make a difference and this shows just how powerful it could be. If it hadn't been for O'Connor and a couple of others, the whole thing probably would've been overlooked simply because people

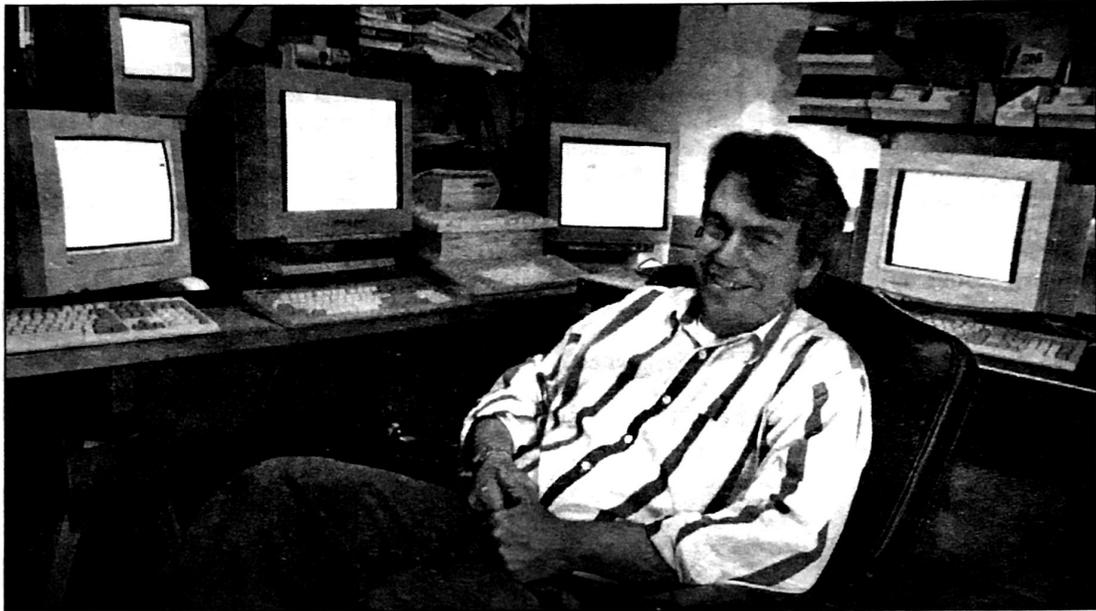


Photo by Larry Marcus

O'Connor, amidst the nine computers he used as weapons in his war.

don't know about these issues yet."

Trimble, who called the phone company with his concerns shortly after hearing from O'Connor, said he even got electronic mail messages from people in California, Texas and Florida explaining how their states were addressing similar issues. O'Connor posted Trimble's name and electronic address alongside nine other key political contacts to a page on the Internet's World Wide Web, which is an easy-to-use system that lets users download images, sound files and videos. O'Connor's damning page featured a detailed explanation of his "electronic redlining" accusation along with a color map outlining the have and have-not areas.

Established city businesses, he argues, will pack up for the suburbs in search of better technology at cheaper prices and emerging business will bypass the urban core altogether—a notion dating to the days of wealthy railroad barons when prosperity often shadowed the latest

stretch of steel track, and towns left by the wayside dried up like raisins in the western sun.

"That's part of the reason the response was so electric," O'Connor says. "Even though people don't understand the technology, because it's still pretty esoteric, they could understand this notion that 'Hey, wait a minute, something's going on here that's not fair.'"

Trimble says that roughly eight small St. Paul businesses sent him messages threatening to relocate if the fast communications technology, called the Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN), wouldn't be available at a fair price. The digital network transforms the 30-year-old copper phone lines found in most Twin Cities locations into information conduits capable of high-speed data transfers and video conferences. Telecommuters, for example, can hook into an office computer network from home while carrying on a conversation over the same phone line. It

makes sense for new businesses to follow the technology, Trimble says, and it's conceivable that smaller city businesses would "throw their stuff in a pickup truck" and head for greener pastures.

Most individuals and small businesses couldn't afford the phone lines until December 1994, when US West announced plans to lower the monthly cost from between \$200 and \$300 a month to just more than \$80 a month virtually everywhere in the metro area. O'Connor, whose new Internet business, called gofast.net, was the only local company offering ISDN Internet connections at the time, waited patiently for the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission to approve the plan.

The first "glimmer of trouble," he says, came roughly two months later when US West revealed that many central residents would have to pay roughly \$50 more a month than their suburban counterparts. The "red-lined" areas were not all impover-

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ished and included places like Kenwood and St. Anthony Park, which O'Connor calls "one of the beauties" of the ISDN issue. He shared the news with the "500 really important people" on his electronic mailing list, including city council members, lawmakers, business associates, friends and US West officials.

"He really beat the bushes," says Mark Fournier, the utility commission's ISDN rate analyst. His office also contacted US West officials after hearing from O'Connor, he says, because the phone company's original filing indicated that the service would be affordably priced and widely available. Regulators postponed a scheduled hearing on the filing in order to investigate the issue with the Department of Public Service. "Why did US West say they were going to offer it on a universal basis when technically they should have known

that they weren't going to be able to?" Fournier says. "We want the service as widely available and as affordable as possible."

US West spokeswoman Mary Hisley says that while O'Connor played a definite role, his efforts had less to do with US West's policy reversal than the company's desire to follow the most sensible business strategy.

"Our intent never changed throughout this whole process," Hisley says. "Soon after we made the filing, it came to our attention that there were some problems, both technical and an operational expenses kind of problem, that we had not been fully aware of. That's when we had to take a step back and just rethink where we were at and how we might be able to best go about this."

Hisley says consumer concern, not the political pressure from O'Connor and others, convinced US West offi-

cial to equip each of their central offices with ISDN technology.

"This is a great product; people want it," she says. "We're a business that tries to listen to our customers' needs and there certainly is a need out there for ISDN."

O'Connor, convinced that his efforts stood at the heart of the change, acknowledges that even with the help of nine computers and powerful technology he couldn't have done it alone. "I'm an old buzzard and I know a lot of people," says the 44-year-old. "The fact that I could send out all those messages to a pretty influential group of people certainly made it easier. But it wasn't the technology that did it. It was good old fashioned power that did it."

O'Connor says he's never orchestrated a similar grassroots movement, on or off the Internet, and doubts he'll ever do it again. Even though US

West's latest offering still needs approval from the utilities commission, O'Connor left for a three-week vacation shortly before US West officially announced their intent to speed up the time frame and hasn't sent a message since.

"I got what I wanted and just sort of backed off after that," he says now. "I doubt I'll ever do it again. It was pretty slick, though. I'm like the idiot who walked up to home plate and hit a home run on the first pitch."

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"It is a socialist idea that making profits is a vice: I consider the real vice is making losses."

—Winston Churchill

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