

# Internet service firms in Minnesota establish state trade association

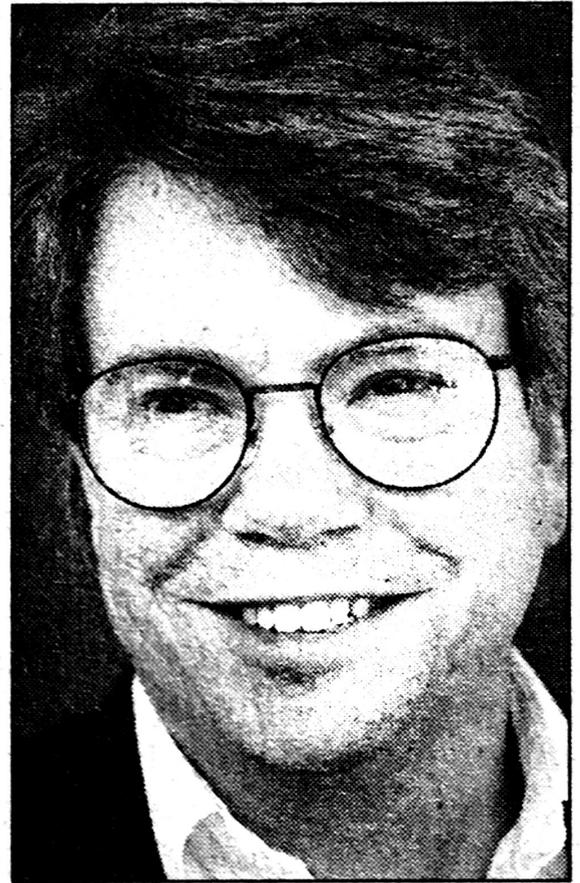
*Group attempts  
to gain influence  
over legislation,  
future of business*

**By Jonathan Gaw**  
*Star Tribune Staff Writer*

In another sign of a maturing industry, several dozen Internet service companies around the state have formed one of the first trade associations of its kind to promote use of the global network of computer networks.

The Minnesota Internet Services Trade Association, which include firms that provide access to and develop content for the network, hopes to bring together a fairly dispersed collection of small businesses that deal with the emerging technology.

"There are very few Internet service providers in the state that are big enough to really do anything as far as influencing legislation and so forth," said Jim Willard, vice chair of the organization and head of Northern Net, a Bemidji-based company that offers Internet access. "We hope



**Mike O'Connor**

that the power of the many will help the small guys here."

While the organization has yet to come up with an agenda, it is likely to take stands on issues such as assuring universal access to the Internet and content legislation.

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— Association will work to dispute misinformation about the Internet.

# INTERNET *from* D1

"It's useful to start thinking about this before playing it out in front of the Legislature," said Mike O'Connor, chairman of the organization and a partner in gofast.net, a St. Paul Internet provider.

O'Connor pointed to legislation last year that would have brought the Internet to the 30 percent of the state that does not already have access to the network through a local telephone call.

"It's to the point now where the only areas left are places where it's much more expensive and much less attractive for companies to provide local access to the Net," O'Connor said. "And guess what, those are the poorest parts of the state as well."

The association also would work to dispute misinformation about the Internet, such as stories several months ago about the extent to which the network was used to distribute pornography.

"There were individuals that spoke out, but it would have been good for us as a group to be able to tell in a helpful and informative way things that

counteract those stories that come down the pipe," O'Connor said.

Internet die-hards have tended to be fiercely independent, and an association of service providers in some ways contradicts the culture of the Internet, but demonstrates the mainstreaming of the network.

"These are formative times," O'Connor said. "There are all kinds of things going on and a lot of times it's like being in the center of a tornado, and it's useful to take ourselves off every once in a while and think a bit about what's going on."

The association's membership so far is exclusively made up of relatively small players, although organizers said companies such as U S WEST Inc., which has a hand in every Internet transaction in the state, would be welcomed, even though the regional telephone company's interests sometimes conflicts with theirs.