

RIPOFF!

BY DAVID OWEN

THE rapid growth of the Internet raises many vexing copyright issues. I have no doubt of the truth of that sentence, because I lifted it straight from someone's Web site. I didn't even retype it!

The biggest Internet-related copyright issue, though, goes far beyond idle plagiarism—long the foundation of the reporter's humble craft. Indeed, I have

by which New Yorkers have always conversed. (In Gristede's fifteen years ago, I got into a screaming fight with a woman over her contention that a shopper who was buying just three items—me—had a moral if not a legal obligation to use the express checkout line even though the express checkout line was longer and moving more slowly than the regular checkout line,



come to suspect that the Internet itself is a ripoff, and an astonishingly brazen one: the entire sprawling on-line world, I now believe, is nothing but a crudely patched-together digital misappropriation of long-established intellectual property of the city of New York.

The evidence is overwhelming. Like New York, the Internet features inexplicable traffic delays, random confrontations with lunatics, and easy, private, around-the-clock access to pornography. The Internet chat room, in which faceless male lowlifes conduct innuendo-filled exchanges while pretending to be women, is a pale electronic simulacrum of its obvious real-life analogue, the Manhattan hotel bar. And "flaming"—the near-psychotic reaming out of innocent strangers on Internet message boards—is merely a keyboard-based version of the method

the rear of which was being brought up by a loudmouthed, face-lifted, cubic-zirconia-encrusted battle-axe with an overflowing cart: her.)

But the theft goes far deeper. The pervasive tone of virtually all on-line communication—a tone that might best be characterized as intimate anonymity—was first developed in Manhattan, by adjacent renters in apartment buildings on the Upper East Side. The Internet's core method of routing information (whereby data don't travel directly from Point A to Point B but are broken apart, dispersed over a far-flung network, and reassembled at their destination) is cribbed from the method by which New York City taxi-drivers have long conveyed arriving internationals from Kennedy Airport to midtown Manhattan. And what is the hyperlink but a wan imita-

tion of one of New York's best-known and most representative amenities, that every block in the city contains a door through which one can enter the same Chinese restaurant?

As a matter of fact, the very notion of meaningful linkage, which forms the conceptual heart of the World Wide Web, was perfected in New York decades ago. I can offer an example from my own experience. One afternoon in 1979, my wife and I went to see Woody Allen's movie "Manhattan," which had just opened. While we were walking home afterward—through Manhattan—we passed Woody Allen himself, who was walking in the opposite direction. My wife and I at that moment were discussing Allen's portrayal of women in the movie, and Allen was walking next to, and talking with, a woman. Had my wife and I so desired, we could have turned around, proceeded a dozen or so blocks back down Fifth Avenue, entered any of several bookstores, and purchased any of several books or magazines containing references to Allen's portrayal of women in one or another of his films. Or we could have stopped at a newsstand and obtained a newspaper that listed those New York City theatres in which revivals of Allen's earlier women-portraying movies were then playing. Or we could have continued north on Fifth Avenue to the apartment of a woman we knew—a woman who was a friend of a writer who would one day become a friend and occasional collaborator of Woody Allen's.

So, whom do we sue? (The casually threatened, utterly groundless class-action lawsuit—a recurring theme of nearly all Internet newsgroup discussions—was, of course, first developed by New Yorkers.) This case could be worth billions to the aggrieved parties (us), assuming we can figure out who's got the deep pockets. All we need is a shameless, blustering, egomaniacal attorney who is willing, in exchange for a cut of the profits, to spend ten or twenty years doggedly dragging this thing through the courts.

Luckily, I've got just the guy. I found his name in a banner advertisement under the heading "Lawyers" in the greatest search engine the world has ever known: the Manhattan Yellow Pages. ♦