

PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

White House Goes High-Tech With Question, Answer Site

■ **Cyberspace:** Aides will answer queries posed by visitors to AOL, other news-oriented Web services.

By JUBE SHIVER Jr.
TIMES STAFF WRITER

WASHINGTON—Inquiring Minds That Want to Know have a surprising new place to turn for answers: the White House.

Starting today, White House aides will field queries posed by visitors to America Online Inc. and other Web sites featuring daily news and political discussion.

The new foray into cyberspace is not an attempt to make an end run around the White House press corps, officials say, but an effort to stimulate democratic discourse online.

AOL, which first raised the idea with the White House a few months ago, has been running a trial version of its question-and-answer site called "Ask the White House."

Today, the nation's largest online service plans to unveil a Web page showing the White House's response to several questions already asked by a small group of AOL members. The questions include whimsical ones, such as whether President Clinton got a flu shot this year (he did) to controversial subjects such as whether the president and other U.S. officials will

make a point of pressing concerns about the World Trade Organization raised by protesters last week in Seattle.

The White House said that as of today, it will start scrolling news-oriented Web sites and accept up to five reader questions from each site during a given week. Officials anticipate that news organizations with Web sites, including The Times, will respond by setting up such services. Each question will be answered within a week.

"We view this as another way for the White House to expand our use of the Internet as a way of communicating with the American people," said White House spokesman Barry Toiv. "It also gives the public the unique opportunity to pose [questions] to the administration."

Neither Clinton nor Vice President Al Gore will personally answer the questions. And officials say they are uncertain whether they have sufficient resources to answer what could turn into a deluge of questions from the several dozen major Web sites that offer news content.

But Toiv said, "We're going to give it a try."

Los Angeles Times

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Media Notes

Dot-Com Santas, Giving Till It Hurts

By HOWARD KURTZ
Washington Post Staff Writer

Technology companies are dipping deep into their dot-com pockets to shower journalists with free goodies.

The largess goes well beyond the old-style bottle of Christmas booze, most of it designed to promote online shopping opportunities and—just maybe—curry favor with reporters covering the industry.

America Online, for instance, has sent out miniature metal shopping carts stuffed with a digital camera (Version 2.0), two CDs, a stuffed bear, a thick slab of Belgian chocolate, a Pokemon key chain, a Harry Potter book, a Women's World Cup soccer program and a Fogdog sports cap.

Judging by the loot flooding The Washington Post newsroom, AOL has plenty of company. (The Post, like other major news organizations, requires that such gifts be returned

or given to charity.)

CellularPhones.com sent out a box of phone accessories, including a headset, an attachment for a car outlet and a silver phone cover. Checkout.com, an online mall, sent a DVD movie, a CD and a video game. BigStar.com provided \$25 gift certificates. 989 Sports, a video game development company, shipped out basketballs.

And some of the gifts are personalized. Nike, the shoe company, sent Post technology columnist Leslie Walker a Nike T-shirt with her first name emblazoned on it. She calls the gift barrage "ridiculous."

"They don't understand how offensive it is to real journalists," says Josh Quittner, editor of Time Digital, whose office is piled high with gifts to be given away. "Part of it is the dot-com frenzy; it's harder for them to get media attention, so they've been going to ever more outrageous extremes. It's really, really crass."

Nancy Glasgow, a spokeswoman for CellularPhones.com, says about 20 journalists got packages worth \$134, from a \$34.95 headset to two antennas that sell for \$19.95 each. "It's not that we're trying to buy attention," she says. The Web site proprietors "just want to do something to make their name stick in the mind. They're not necessarily trying to bribe anyone with goodies. It always helps to have something physical in your hand."

AOL spokeswoman Wendy Goldberg says the annual mailing to about 200 media types is designed "to introduce reporters to the merchant shoppers we have. The best way to get reporters to understand the variety and depth out there is to actually show it to them. . . . The difference is actually being able to see the product, touch and feel it."

AOL includes a note suggesting that journalists who cannot accept the largess—donated by companies ranging from E-Toys to CBS Sportsline—give the stuff to charity.

Nike spokeswoman Angie Clerc says that "no one that I know of has responded negatively to receipt of these packages." Ann Garrett, spokeswoman for Checkout.com, says the gift basket "creates a good vibe" among 75 journalists with whom the company has forged "great relationships. . . . We have received incredible feedback, very nice e-mails."

Beyond the freebies, some Internet offers are even more troubling.

Shannon Henry, a Post technology reporter, was offered 1,000 shares of stock by a Washington area venture capitalist in an Internet company he was about to take public. The shares were offered at an insider's price available only to friends and family; the stock jumped 60 percent on opening day, which would have given Henry a profit of at least \$8,400.

"I felt really uncomfortable about it," says Henry, explaining that she immediately told the financier, whom she declined to identify, that it would be unethical for her to accept. She says her would-be benefactor was unaware that a San Jose Mercury News columnist was suspended

and demoted for turning a \$9,000 profit on a similar Internet stock offer.

More Misgivings in L.A.

Throughout the controversy over the Los Angeles Times splitting revenue from a special magazine issue with the Staples Center sports arena, the paper has maintained that newsroom staffers were unaware of the cozy arrangement. But two senior Times editors now say they raised objections with Editor Michael Parks in late September, as the Oct. 10 issue was heading to press.

Sports Editor Bill Dwyre says he told Parks, "We can't do this. Are you aware what's going on, that we're sharing revenue with a news source?" By then, Dwyre says, he believes Parks knew of the arrangement.

"I felt pretty angry and upset," says magazine Editor Alice Short, who opposed the special is-

sue from the beginning and was ordered to go along. "It violated the fundamental rules of our business. It's kind of crushing for the people who worked weekends and nights." The editors' opposition was first reported by the San Francisco Examiner.

Short says there's still "great angst and debate" over whether the ill-fated issue could have been killed at the eleventh hour.

Internet Watch

A much-buzzed-about Web site is being officially announced today. The New Yorker's Kurt Andersen, a former editor of Spy, and ex-Spin editor Michael Hirschorn have formed Powerful Media, which will serve up media and entertainment coverage to computers, Palm Pilots, wireless phones and whatever other gadgets have been invented by next spring's launch.

The venture, which also includes former Brill's Content president Deanna Brown, has stirred interest by attracting big-time venture capitalists and big-league writers from the likes of the Wall Street Journal, Variety and Rolling Stone. Some material, aimed at working journalists, will cost around \$100 a year, but much will be free.

"Its focus will be obsessive and deep on these worlds," Andersen says. "We'll cover TV, movies, journalism, music, the Internet, books, magazines." Watch that space.

Internet Watch: II

The White House press office is trying to get plugged in. Under a deal with America Online that will be expanded to include other Web outfits, spokesman Barry Toiv says the presidential flacks will respond to the most popular five questions submitted by cybercitizens. In the AOL debut, the top question involved the trade protests in Seattle, followed by "Did President Clinton get a flu shot this fall season?" (For those without a modem, the answer is yes.)

Ambush

Shortly before Thursday's presidential debate in New Hampshire, Fox's Carl Cameron melodramatically aimed his "CarlCam" video camera at Andy Hiller, the Boston TV reporter who surprised George W. Bush with a foreign policy pop quiz.

"Was it your intention to destroy the Republican Party's great hope for the year 2000?" Cameron demanded.

"Is this for your own home use?" Hiller said with a deer-in-the-headlights look.

"Are you suggesting your answer would be different?" Cameron fired back.

Hiller said he felt like a "victim," but added that Cameron's Fox network was there only because ABC, which had planned to carry the debate, "decided this was insufficiently newsworthy for a bona fide network."

No word on whether Cameron will air the compromising footage of his old friend.

The Washington Post

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