

Inmates find ways to go online

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Keith Maydak's jail cells are roomier than most. Must be all that cyberspace. State and federal prisons don't let inmates use Internet computers behind bars - and the Allegheny County Jail doesn't either. Yet Maydak has answered a reporter's e-mails from the Pittsburgh jail, and later an Ohio lockup, while he awaits sentencing for violating probation on a 900-number phone scam that cost AT&T \$550,000 dollars.

Thousands of other inmates access the Internet indirectly using inmate telephone and mail privileges and a network of family, friends or activists. Once on the Web, they enlist celebrities like Susan Sarandon to plead their case, pillory the prosecutors who imprisoned them, or simply find pen pals.

Maydak, 34, told The Associated Press he uses a network of toll-free phone numbers and friends to access the Internet for him. He was inspired as a teen by the 1983 movie "War Games" in which nuclear war almost results when a teenager hacks into a military computer.

And that's precisely why state and federal prisons keep inmates away from the Internet, said Joe Weedon, a spokesman for the American Correctional Association in Lanham, Md. "There were a few jurisdictions that allowed it on a limited basis, but they ran into problems with offenders contacting their victims or inmates running scams of some sort."

Federal appellate courts have yet to hear a major case on inmates rights to access the Internet but victims' advocates promise to fight them.

"Your rights are very limited when you go to prison and certainly the right to communicate with people on the Internet is one of them," said Michael Rushford, of the Sacramento, Calif.-based Criminal Justice Legal Foundation.

Arizona inmates successfully challenged a state law that prohibited helping inmates access the Internet. The law was passed after a murder victim's family complained about the killer's Internet pen pal ad.

But a federal district judge struck down the law in 2003, saying it was one thing to stop inmates from using the Internet in jail - but quite another to hinder their access to it through intermediaries.

The American Civil Liberties Union sued in that case on behalf of the Canadian Coalition Against the Death Penalty, which publishes Web sites for about 500 U.S. death row inmates, and pen pal solicitations for about 700 more, said co-founder Tracy Lamourie.

"They're sentenced to death, they're not sentenced to silence," Lamourie said. "Even if just one was (innocent), how can we silence someone who's going to be killed in our name?"

Lamourie's group maintained a Web site for Juan Melendez, 53, who spent 18 years on Florida's death row before he was found to be wrongfully convicted three years ago.

Lamourie and her partner pay for envelopes, stationery and postage out of pocket or with donations that trickle in. The server space for the Web pages is donated by a European death penalty opponent.

"I try to understand how alarming it would be for a victims' family to see the smiling face of an inmate who has caused some great harm to a family on the World Wide Web looking for women to write to him," said Donna Hamm of Middle Ground Prison Reform Inc. "But it's difficult to imagine how that infringes on a free world person's right to put something on the Internet."

Hamm, a retired judge, co-founded the group with her husband, James, a convicted murderer she met while touring a prison tour in the 1980s. His sentence has since been commuted.

These days, jails and prisons are trying to take advantage of Internet and computer technology without letting inmates abuse it.

Earlier this year, the Arkansas Board of Corrections approved an Internet banking system to route money to inmate commissary accounts. Relatives can mail money orders to a centralized processing center for deposit by Internet into inmate accounts. Inmates can access the money instantly at prison commissaries across the state.

Alabama prison officials, meanwhile, are installing law library computers to give inmates better access to court rulings, but no Internet or e-mail access.

Still, such outreach programs sometimes backfire.

An inmate at the Weld County (Colo.) Jail in Greeley has been charged with using jail library computers to access county employees' payroll and personal information. Authorities say faulty firewalls were to blame. The inmate even sent an e-mail, although authorities say they don't believe he shared the employee information or did anything illegal with it.

And in Arizona, Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio - not his inmates - is fighting for the right to use the Internet to show the public live video from inside his lockups. The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals has ruled that Arpaio's use of cameras and the Internet to webcast video of prisoners being booked was unduly humiliating. Arpaio is appealing to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Arpaio has made national headlines for dressing up inmates in striped uniforms and making them work on chain gangs. He says the Web cameras served two purposes.

"We had a guy that died in the restraint chair and the case settled for \$8 million, even though my officers were cleared, they did nothing wrong. So I said, 'OK, I'm going to let the world be my jury' ... let the world see how my officers conduct themselves with these drunks and psychos that come in," Arpaio said.

"The other reason is maybe it will be a deterrent. The johns can all wave to their wives when they're picked up for prostitution and say, 'Hi honey! I'm in jail.' And the drunk drivers can wave to their employers."

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