

Interoperability overdue for instant messaging

October 15 2009, By Troy Wolverton

You would think it was crazy if your cell phone could call only people with phones on the same network. But we put up with that absurd situation when it comes to instant messaging -- and have for years. Worse, there's little sign of change anytime soon.

On a typical day, I have three -- and sometimes four -- [instant messaging](#) clients running at the same time.

I run Yahoo Messenger because it was the chat service we used when I worked at CNet and many of my colleagues and some of my sources from those days use it exclusively. I run AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) because it was the chat program we used when I worked at TheStreet and it still provides me with the best access to many of my sources on Wall Street. And I run Google Talk because it's what our Web staff at the San Jose Mercury News uses, and it's the best way to communicate with them when I need to tweak a story on our Web site.

On top of that, the editors here are pushing us to run a new IM program -- Spark. So far I haven't found it very helpful because only a few people use it and my computer becomes unstable when it's running.

Running that many different instant messaging clients is a constant frustration. They suck up memory and processing power, slowing down -- and sometimes crashing -- my PC. When I want to send someone an instant message, I first have to remember what chat program they're on. But if I want to remain accessible to my contacts, I have little choice but

to have all those programs running at once.

You'd think this problem would have been fixed by now. Internet chat programs have been around since the late 1980s and hit the mainstream in the mid-1990s with the popularity of applications such as ICQ and AIM.

Way back in 2001, the [Federal Communications Commission](#) identified the lack of interoperability among these services as a major issue. As part of the AOL-Time Warner merger, the FCC barred AOL from adding advanced features such as video chat to AIM unless AOL allowed chat clients from competitors such as Microsoft and Yahoo to work with AIM.

In the wake of that ruling, there have been some stabs at interoperability. Yahoo Messenger users can send messages to Windows Messenger users and vice versa. Users of Apple's iChat can send instant messages to AIM users and Google Talk users. Many chat programs consumers use, such as AIM, are interoperable with some chat programs used by businesses.

But the FCC let AOL off the hook and backed off of its push on interoperability in 2003. Since then, there's been little movement toward a unified instant messaging system.

Indeed, the instant messaging universe is in some ways more fragmented than ever. Internet calling program Skype, which launched in 2003 and now has millions of users, is similar to chat clients such as AIM or Yahoo Messenger. But you can't use it to connect with people on those or other chat services.

More recently, many consumer-oriented companies have added chat features to their Web sites. But in order to use them, you have to be on those Web pages. You can't use AIM or Google Talk to ping someone in

Comcast's customer service department. Similarly, Facebook recently added a chat service to its site, but you can't use it to connect with anyone on Yahoo Messenger.

As video chat and live calling services catch on, the lack of a way to connect to people across services will become even more irritating.

There have been some attempts to address the situation. Programs such as Trillian allow you to log into multiple IM services at once. But it and similar programs tend not to offer all of the features of the dedicated chat clients. And sometimes they just don't work; while I can run Yahoo Messenger in the office, I haven't been able to get Trillian to sign on to Yahoo's chat service.

Even when it works, Trillian's just a stopgap measure. It allows an individual to communicate with friends on different networks, but it doesn't solve the interoperability problem. You couldn't use it, say, to create a group chat with a friend on AIM and another using Yahoo Messenger.

There's reason to hope the situation eventually will get better. AOL, which has a reputation for not playing well with others when it comes to IM, has lately been promising a change of heart. The company recently hired Brad Garlinghouse, a former Yahoo executive who spearheaded its IM deal with Microsoft. In a conversation with me last week, Garlinghouse shared my frustration with the lack of interoperability and promised that AOL at least is committed to addressing the problem.

The problem is not a technical one, Garlinghouse said. It's a corporate one: Each of the major IM vendors has pushed its own solution to the problem and hasn't wanted to sign on to those of its rivals.

Here's hoping those companies grow up and figure out how to get along.

The 70 million of us Americans using instant messaging would appreciate an end to this lunacy.

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