It's money that matters

Microsoft monopolizes market with Web browser

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A bumper sticker I saw a few years ago in Milwaukee said it all: Resistance is futile. We are Microsoft. You will be assimilated.

When I told my friend about this sticker, he laughed and laughed. "Exactly!" he said.

One experience with Microsoft really upset him. You see, my friend needs to read documents off the Internet for a class. The documents he needs are run by Microsoft's operating system – which he doesn't have. Microsoft refuses to allow "its" documents to be read by other computer servers. Therefore, my friend was unable to use these documents.

Now, for most people, the solution would be to use a Microsoft-run computer system at school. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln is loaded with them. Just go to any computer lab on campus, and you'll find Microsoft programs. There is little alternative.

However, my friend didn't want to do that. He wanted to use his computer. And, up until about one to 1½ years ago, that is exactly what he would have done. In the "good old days," you could pull up any computer program off the Internet by any type of computer. Yet now, Microsoft

"encodes" its documents, so the company will not run unless you have Windows on your computer.

My friend has an old Apple Macintosh. He loves it. He doesn't want to give it up. He certainly won't give it up in order to give a multibillion-dollar-a-year company any of his hard-earned money – especially after this incident.

Now, it's a matter of principle. And, wonder of wonders, the U.S. government agrees with him.

The government has finally heard the pleas of the American consumer. U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno said, "Microsoft is unlawfully taking advantage of its Windows monopoly to protect and extend that monopoly."

Reno is involved because of complaints like the one made by my friend. So many people are upset by problems induced by Microsoft that the Justice Department had to act. Otherwise, Microsoft would continue to roll over everyone.

In 1995, Microsoft signed an agreement with the U.S. government, promising that "Microsoft shall not enter into any license agreement that by its terms prohibits or restricts the OEM's licensing, sale or distribution of any non-Microsoft Operating System Software product."

However, by refusing to allow documents run by Microsoft to be read by competing Web browsers, Microsoft has violate the terms of this agreement. And, as usual, the company expected to get away with this because the computer industry is

so new that it can be hard to define the line between "competitive" and "stifling."

One of the few companies to make any money competing against Microsoft in any arena is Netscape, a small, start-up company that makes a popular Web browser called Netscape Navigator Gold. Netscape has made inroads in Microsoft's Web browser business by undercutting its price.

Yet, Microsoft all of a sudden decided to give its Web browser, the Microsoft Explorer, away. (Microsoft has $8 billion in liquid assets. It can afford to give stuff away from time to time.)

But, that wasn't the worst of it. Microsoft is allowed to give as much stuff away as it wants. The Justice Department can't stop that, nor should it try.

What it is trying to stop is Microsoft's insistence on installing its Web browser, and only its Web browser, on computers that run its Windows 95 operating system. (Virtually every computer made in the last five years uses Windows 95 as its disk operating system, because it's user friendly.) However, by forcing people to take the Web browser whether they want it or not, Microsoft is using its considerable clout to force consumers into taking its products, rather than just letting them buy them. This action "stepped over the line" and proved that Microsoft is indeed stifling the competition.

What's even worse than

Microsoft forcing all of these companies to use its Web browser when they use the Microsoft software is this: As my friend found out, Microsoft has come up with a way to make its documents incompatible with Netscape. This means that if you want to pull up these documents, you have two choices: 1. Go to Unix, and pull them up the long way. Or, 2. Buy Microsoft's Web browser, and give them your hard-earned money. This is unacceptable to the U.S. government, and should be unacceptable to us as consumers as well.

This is why other companies don't even try to compete against Microsoft. They don't have the money to buck Microsoft's monopoly.

In its annual report for fiscal year 1997, Microsoft stated that its competitors included Apple, IBM, Hewlett-Packard, Digital Equipment Corporation and Sun Microsystems. However, only Sun Microsystems is worth $100 million or more. The rest might be worth $35 million put together (counting only their computer divisions). That may seem like a lot of money, but it's only about 10 percent of what Microsoft is worth.

Microsoft is incredibly dominant. It has more than 90 percent of the computer market locked up. It's worth more than $200 billion dollars. It has that unheard-of $8 billion liquid assets.

Let's compare it with another former "industry giant." IBM earned $147,766 profit last year, while Microsoft earned $3.45 billion.

Microsoft's other competitors just aren't in the same league – if Microsoft is the major leagues, IBM is the rookie league. There is no way it can compete.

Only a few companies have gained a respectable market share by going against Microsoft. One of the few is Sun Microsystems, which came up with the popular new Java computing language. Microsoft is currently being sued by Sun for trying to assimilate Java. (What a surprise, eh?)

The Sherman Anti-Trust Act is supposed to take care of little problems like monopolies. The Sherman Act was aimed toward stopping abusive practices of big companies such as Standard Oil. The U.S. Congress of 1890 wanted to spur free enterprise and competition. They didn't want what amounted to "excessive private power" from any company.

The Sherman Act worked in the case of AT&T, railroads and big oil, but it isn't working against Microsoft. Why? Perhaps because the computer industry is so new. It is hard to tell "competition" from monopoly unless a company does something egregiously bad.

Now, Microsoft finally has. Between the lawsuit by Sun Microsystems, and the Justice Department probe, Microsoft is finally getting what it deserves.

There must be an end to Microsoft's unfair and monopolistic practices. At the very least, Microsoft must make its documents compatible with competing Web browsers, such as Netscape. Microsoft should be forced to diversify, much as AT&T was in the mid to late 1980s. Then, consumers might have real choice, low prices and great technology.

But don't hold your breath.

Oh no, El Niño

People on West Coast take storm warnings in stride

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"That's great
It starts with a wave break
Hot sloshes with the ocean cold
Massive rainstorms, dead plankton
Hopefully Lenny Bruce is not afraid for this one either."

If my poorly composed REM sendup didn't help, I was referring to the most hyped-up weather event of the century. No, not Steve Willey passing gas, but dreaded El Niño.

For the past few months, reports on El Niño have been everywhere, from a special pullout section in USA Today to the cover of Newsweek, preaching Armageddon of biblical proportions, to, most recently, the washed-up morning show host on 101.9 The Sludge, ranting about the hype.

What is El Niño, you might ask? Allow me to explain.

Basically, El Niño is a random weather phenomenon that is as strange and mysterious as a monkey with four asses. El Niño (named by some Peruvian fishermen hundreds of years ago) is a regularly occurring climatic change that happens every two to seven years. It begins when the warm water, between South America and Indonesia, mixes with the cold water north of the equator.

Aside from really confusing the ocean's fish, the warmer ocean pumps more energy and moisture into the atmosphere, altering wind and rainfall patterns around the world. It can cause both drought and heavy rains and, in southern Africa, it is expected to lead to a dry spell beginning later this year. This anticipated drought has already caused the Zimbabwe Stock Exchange to plum-

met more than 2,000 points. The rainy part of El Niño wreaks havoc along the coastline of South America. The majority of the rainfall, though, hovers above the epicenter of natural disaster – southern California.

With a 50-50 chance of massive tidal waves, flooding and mud slides, the media in southern California have latched on to El Niño tighter than the Iron Sheik's "Camel Clutch" and are now the harbinger of doom.

An example of the media's obsession with El Niño can be found at the Web site of the Los Angeles CBS affiliate Channel 2000. (It's actually Channel 2, but they probably think that Channel 2000 sounds cooler.) On its El Niño Web site, it has everything from safe-driving techniques during El Niño period to the skinny on sandbags. And it's provided transcripts of every story it's run about El Niño – 16 since May 5. The niftiest part of this site, though, is that you can download movies and animated images documenting the progression of El Niño.

Yee haw! Imagine the fun Channel 2000 viewers are having while they watch as impending death lurches ever closer.

In the L.A. area, there are more than 10 million people. Of those 10 million, I know one. So, when no one was looking, I borrowed the DN phone and fired off a call out to Malibu to my friend Guy, who was recently cast as the young 4-LOM in the new Star Wars trilogy, to see what his El Niño preparations were.

"People out here are really annoyed with the whole El Niño fiasco. They say all this messed-up stuff is gonna happen, but nothing has yet. There's just a bunch of sandbags everywhere, the beach has a wall in the middle of it, and people keep posting El Niño warnings everywhere," he said.

"So, have you practiced any

emergency drills yet?" I asked.

"No, and that's probably going to lead to our downfall. Californians have a really small attention span and are too stupid to care. Since nothing has happened after months of hype, I think everyone around here has forgotten about it," he replied.

Guy then went on saying, "I think that when a landslide sweeps us out in the ocean, we'll all have wished that we had prepared for this a bit more."

I hung up the phone fearing for Guy's life. El Niño sounds like pretty serious business. I then remembered Bob, a top mountain bike racer who lives in Lincoln, went to Chico State during the El Niño of 1983. I called him up and expected an action-packed tale of a person's will to survive.

My mentioning of the El Niño, caused him to wax poetic, not about disaster, but about the surf. "Dude-bra the surf was just insane. Waves were as tall as the pier. I about flunked the entire semester 'cuz I couldn't drag myself away from the beach."

Isolated here in Nebraska, we have nothing to worry about. If anything, El Niño promises a mild winter. Out in

California, the surf will probably be up, and rich folk's homes will turn into sleds as they slide toward the ocean, something that seems to happen anyway, El Niño

or not. My prediction: In a few weeks some scandal of O.J. proportions will strike L.A. and the hype will blow away faster than Macaulay Culkin's post-pubescent career.

MATT HANEY/DN