

The tax man cometh

An Internet taxation system would overstep the bounds of federal government

Imagine sitting down at a desk and inserting a debit card into a slot in a computer. Someone would sign on to the Internet, and the computer accesses the debit card, sending some of the person's money to the government. With every online purchase he makes, the computer automatically takes out the sale amount and a little more to send to the government. A person sends an e-mail and the light on his computer blinks again, as more of his hard-earned dollars are sent Washington's way.



MIKE WALTERS

criminate against electronic commerce," said Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore. State and local governments are petitioning Congress to help combat a problem they haven't proven exists. To open up the realm of the Internet to taxation is dangerous to taxpayers, but to do so on such a shaky premise is irresponsible.

For years, the Internet has created new businesses, allowed old ones to do business more quickly and efficiently, allowed people to send instant e-mails without having to wait days on "snail mail," and others to chat online rather than spend hundreds of dollars on long-distance phone calls.

Introducing taxation to a domain the nation has kept tax-free would be a terrible mistake. If Americans let the gov-

ernment break the barrier of taxation into the realm of the Internet, there is no reason for them to stop. Even while debating this bill, Congress has already introduced the Streamlined Sales and Use Tax Act, which would force online vendors to impose sales taxes. Internet users already can't buy clothes, gas, school supplies, furniture, books or movies without seeing their money taken away by taxes, which promote government programs many Americans don't agree with anyway. Should Americans have to add to the list of places where the government steals their money?

Supporters of increased taxation often defend their position by explaining that the government needs taxpayer money to run its pro-

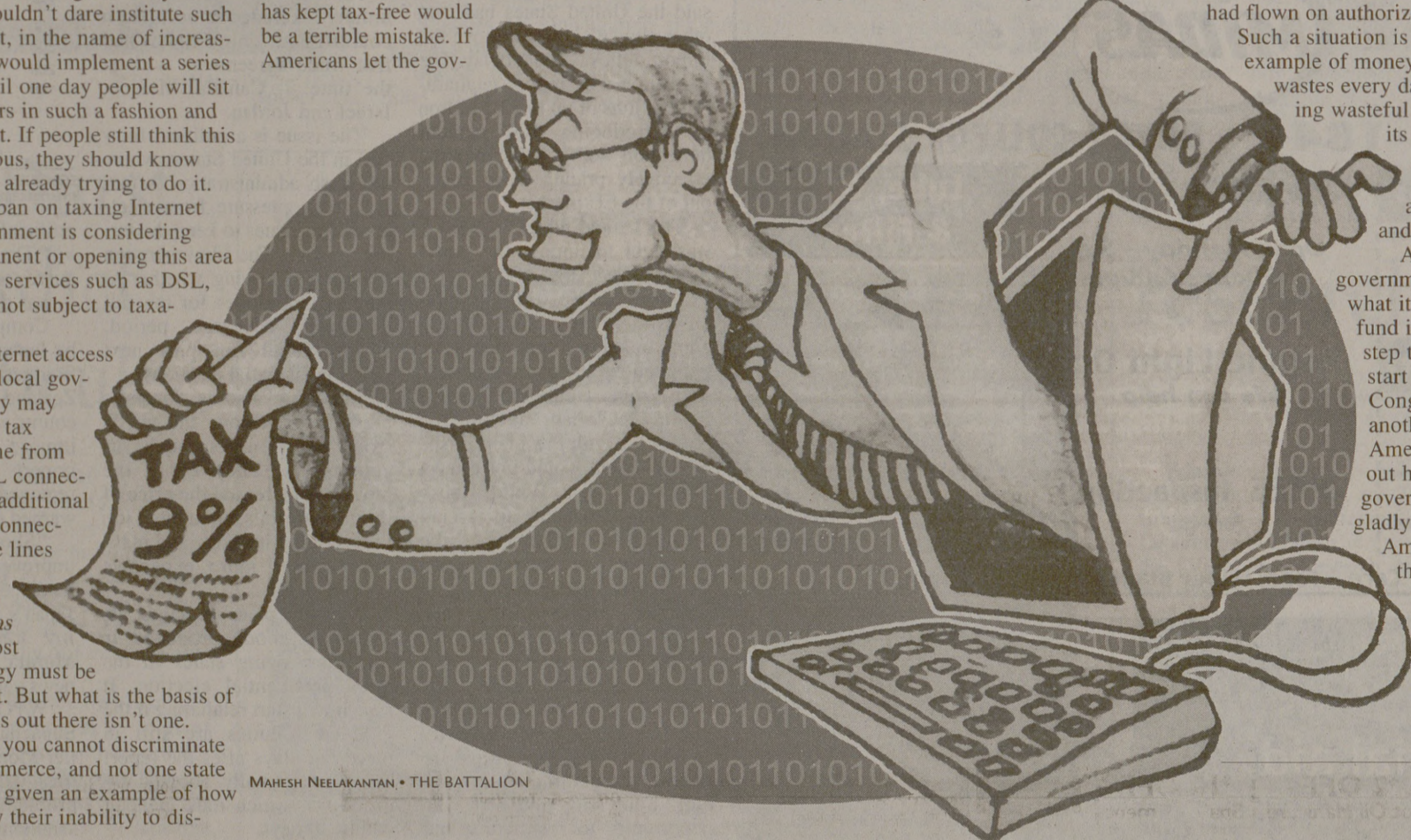
grams. Rather than seek new areas to tax or increase old ones, the government needs to cut back its current spending and programs. Money is wasted on frivolous items throughout government, and this saved money could avoid the need for an unnecessary tax.

For example, The General Accounting Office, which is Congress' audit and investigative arm, found that 73 percent of premium class air travel purchased during the past two years by the Department of Defense was not justified. They cited a case in which a Defense Department family relocated from London to Hawaii and flew premium class for \$18,000-\$20,000, more than it would have cost if they had flown on authorized coach tickets.

Such a situation is an unimaginably small example of money the U.S. government wastes every day. Rather than eliminating wasteful spending by examining its budgets, the government goes first to the paycheck of the American taxpayer and demands a larger cut, and this is unacceptable.

Americans must demand government be responsible for what it spends by refusing to fund its incompetence. Any step toward that goal must start now, by stopping Congress from taxing yet another area of American life. Americans have seen throughout history that if they give government an inch, they will gladly take their wallet.

Americans must hold on to their ground by holding on to a tax-free Internet.



MAHESH NEELAKANTAN • THE BATTALION

Mike Walters is a senior psychology major.

The government wouldn't dare institute such a system overnight, but, in the name of increasing its pocketbook, it would implement a series of small measures, until one day people will sit down at their computers in such a fashion and not think anything of it. If people still think this idea sounds preposterous, they should know that the government is already trying to do it.

With the five-year ban on taxing Internet access over, the government is considering making the ban permanent or opening this area to taxation. Currently, services such as DSL, cable and dial-up are not subject to taxation.

The move to tax Internet access comes from state and local governments, that fear they may lose a large amount of tax money that would come from phone lines, since DSL connections don't require an additional phone line and cable connections don't need phone lines at all. Some state officials believe that since this new technology has allegedly resulted in lost revenue, this technology must be taxed to make up for it. But what is the basis of their argument? It turns out there isn't one.

"All the bill says is you cannot discriminate against electronic commerce, and not one state has come forward and given an example of how they have been hurt by their inability to dis-

E-nightmare

Voting machines could cause problems similar to the 2000 presidential election

The battle of online file sharing of copyrighted material has reached a new and, frankly, odd level. This time, though, the battle is not over MP3s or movies — it's over memos. Last Tuesday, the Online Policy Group, an Internet service provider, and two students from Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, filed suit against Diebold Election Systems to stop the company from threatening ISPs hosting Web sites containing internal company memos and e-mails. The memos and e-mails outline problems with Diebold's electronic voting machines. U.S. District Judge Jeremy Fogel put the case on an accelerated schedule due to the urgency of the issue.



JENELLE WILSON

The protection of copyrighted material and what falls under the fair use exception is not the only issue at hand. This case involves a fundamental principle of democracy: Participation by the people. Fair and equal elections are essential to American government, but instead of fostering debate on whether new technology is apt to provide fair elections, Diebold is attempting to stifle it.

The only way for the people to know if their votes are being counted fairly is to provide them with all the facts in the case, and the district court must ensure they have access to the information.

After the 2000 presidential elections debacle, there is a push to replace the old mechanical, chad-producing machines with electronic ones. Currently, 33,000 Diebold machines have been sold in the United States and many are already being used, according to The New York Times. However, in July, a study by a group of experts from Rice University and Johns Hopkins University found major flaws in the software running the machines. The problems include lapses in security that would allow voters to cast extra votes and allow people with access to the machine to alter ballots, so that the person voting, thinking that he is voting for his candidate, would actually be voting for the opponent. And because there is no trial the voter would have no way of knowing whom he really voted for.

If the software indeed contains these prob-

lems (and some of the memos warn of software bugs), keeping that information from the public, letting the public continue thinking its votes are being fairly and accurately counted, when they may not be, is repugnant. The people bringing memos describing these problems to light were doing a public good. With how advanced and connected society is today, there is no excuse for software loopholes that could allow someone to fix a democratic election. And there is certainly no excuse for keeping this information from the public.

While the Diebold information is protected under copyright law, there is the fair use exception, which allows portions of copyrighted material to be used for the purposes of commentary and criticism, according to the Stanford University Libraries Web site. There is a four-pronged test to decide if something falls under fair use, including how much of the copyrighted material is used and its purpose. According to a letter written by Wendy Seltzer, an attorney for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a group representing OPG and the students, the use of Diebold memos and e-mails meets these requirements because it is meant to encourage public debate of problems with the machines. Those posting the memos are not trying to profit off another's expressive works, which are the purpose of copyright laws.

With something as important as the availability of fair elections, companies that make voting machines must be more upfront about the reliability of their products. Companies have a right to protect their software from being pirated by other companies, but they must not attempt to stifle criticism of how dependable that software is. Because the results of elections affect all Americans, software running the machines that votes are cast on must be open to public review to ensure they are working correctly. As Adam Stubblefield, a co-author of the July study, told The Times, "This isn't the code for a vending machine. This is the code that protects our democracy."

Jenelle Wilson is a senior political science major.

MAIL CALL

Silver Taps serves families of dead

In response to a Nov. 7 mail call:

Silver Taps, to me, is Texas A&M's most important tradition, and I have never missed a single one.

In the summer of 2002 my cousin, Colin, a student at Tech, was taken from us. When we went to Lubbock for his funeral, several students organized a candlelight vigil in his memory, and about 200 people came to his funeral. Seeing so many people come together to honor Colin was such an immense help to my family, showing us that he was already missed.

Silver Taps is how we show grieving families and friends that we are sorry for their loss. It is how we show them that their sons, daughters, or friends time at A&M was not a waste.

For those who have lost someone, seeing people show up to honor the dead really does matter. It matters to the families of Levi Windle, Chiang Cheng-Hsien, and all the other Aggies who have been and will be honored at Silver Taps. For them, your attendance at Silver Taps will be the most important thing you do during your time here.

Liz Machol
Class of 2005

Some students grieve differently

Mr. Vargo suggests that to be true Aggies, we must go to Silver Taps. It is great that people want to honor a fellow Aggie who has fallen, but does that mean that we all should deal with death in the same way? It is ridiculous to assume that someone is not an Aggie because he chooses to deal with death differently. When the time comes that I

must deal with the death of a loved one, I would prefer to be surrounded by those who knew them.

Feeling this way, I do not find it right for me to partake in something I would not want done for me.

Lastly, do not sit there and tell me that I "fool" around all month and become busy all of a sudden during Silver Taps. I take pride in my education and constantly work to improve it and thus remain busy at all times. I find it sad that during a time of war, we still have to deal with people forcing their views onto others. You do not define what an Aggie is, Mr. Vargo, our heart does.

Brandon Johns
Class of 2005

Abortion debate caused by men

I am really enjoying all the mail calls from guys sharing such simplistic solutions for abortion. Unfortunately, it's not their rights being stripped, their bodies involved, and from what I read, it's not their responsibility either. They seem to take no blame whatsoever — this whole issue is completely the responsibility of women.

I'm not saying that I'm pro-life or pro-choice, but I am saying that I won't stand to be blamed or feel ashamed for being a woman in this country. Who stalk, abuse, use, molest, rape and impregnate women? Maybe if more guys were men and not predators, the situation wouldn't be so advanced and out of control. Maybe if guys could treat women with dignity and respect, like they do themselves, there wouldn't be an issue. Are there no longer any dignified and respectable men?

Women's rights to safety, health and growth in all

aspects of life should be embraced by all, both men and women — and not thought of as a plague or 'anti-men' ideology. I can't wait to leave this hypocritical, overly conservative, ridiculously closed-minded city, a place evidently full of insecure men completely frightened of strong, respectable women who know what's best for themselves.

Leigh Elena Henderson
Class of 2004

Border crossers break laws

Never have I been so embarrassed to be associated with Texas A&M as when witnessing the protest by the Young Conservatives of Texas at the George Bush Award for Public Service last Friday. These students chanted, "Texans like Bush, Commies like Kennedy." Commies? As an ideology, Communism has been dead for decades. If Soviet Communism, well, the Soviet Union imploded in 1991. If Chinese Communism, George Bush has had far closer dealings for decades as American representative to Beijing and as president than Ted Kennedy.

I stand second to none in urging everyone, especially students, to become involved in the political process. But activism should be based on intelligence, not ignorance.

Jonathan Coopersmith
Associate Professor

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