Three articles in this month’s journal raise serious concerns about the internet becoming the future marketplace for the sale of cigarettes.1–3 One seller predicts that 20% of all cigarettes will be sold over the internet in 10 years. The warning is clear: if the tobacco industry embraces this new unregulated medium, many of the major public interventions that we have developed to curb real-world lung cancer could go up in a puff of cyber smoke. Taxes, ad bans, and youth access laws are easily eroded online.

To test this premise, I took my own digital tour of the web starting first with Brown and Williamson’s (B&W) and RJ Reynolds’ (RJR) on line document depositories, and found megabyte plans for moving operations to the world wide web (www.tobaccosolution.com). A juicy, 1997, RJR internal memo boasts of the new power of the web to get their brands warm and cozy with individual smokers. Camel would have its own home page with instant clicks to Camel Cash, chat rooms, a store, and, of course, the date of the next Camel Club Night nearest you; a virtual classroom for teaching nicotine addiction. Similarly, B &W has plans to use the web to market its brands. Not surprisingly, B&W successfully sued New York State when it banned internet sales in 2000. The judge unfortunately traded the health of lungs over the commercial interests of the tobacco industry.

My next visit was to www.discount-cigarettes.com, a portal for 50 plus online retailers. Most sites offered single cartons at half the price you pay at a bricks and mortar retail outlet. You only had to read the site’s confidentiality policies not to share information with state tax officials to realise why the cigarettes were so cheap.

The federal Jenkins Act requires out of state vendors to report purchasers’ names to in-state tax departments, but sites on native American land claim sovereignty from state authority, and sites from low tax states, such as Virginia, claim that by buying its 4 cent tax, their reporting is done. So much for making old and proven measures history. How about the new, powerful applications that are hidden in cookies that build data bases about an individual’s smoking behaviour every time they log on. What if you fail to make that weekly reorder or if you quit. Tailored emails could be sent to your home PC offering discounts or promotions. Or how about the email from the smoking fetish site with an attached gif file of an enticing smoking model could be sent to your home PC only in a gauzy haze of smoke.

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Well, that’s my smoking cyber tour. Cigarette ads and sales over the web could do more damage than a global computer virus. In the real world, cigarettes cause lung cancer. The lung gets cut out and the smoker dies. Refocusing your hard drive to get rid of a virus is easy. Wisely, the Framework Convention for Tobacco Control calls for a ban on cigarette ads on the web. After my tour, I recommend that it be amended to ban cigarette sales entirely. Cigarettes just do not belong in cyberspace.

GREGORY N CONNOLLY

Tobacco Control Program, Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 250 Washington Street, Boston, MA 02478, USA
Greg.Connolly@state.ma.us

2 Ribisl KM, Kim AE, Williams RS. Web sites selling cigarettes: how many are there in the USA and what are their sales practices? Tobacco Control 2001; 10:352–9.