New challenges for Instant Messaging
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The boom of messenger services in real time has made the main internet companies like Yahoo!, MSN y AOL think about the possibility of charging individuals and companies for its use.

On 20\textsuperscript{th} September Microsoft announced the closure of all its public chat rooms in several countries. The week before this the software giant modified the protocols of its MSN Messenger application to prevent the users of rival services, like AOL or Yahoo, from carrying on individual sessions with users of its application. This practice of blocking their respective messenger services was immediately followed by AOL and Yahoo. In this way, instant messaging returns to the incompatibility of its origins.

Communication
Instant messaging (IM) consists of software that enables the online communication of one or more users simultaneously by means of text messages and, in some applications, with voice and the sending of images. This is the Internet application software that has grown most and indeed it is the second most employed tool by surfers after e-mail. The popularisation of instant messaging was brought to us by ICQ, pronounced I seek you, which is software that installs itself in the user’s computer as a customer and enables the communication between peers in a simple and cost-free way. In 1998 America Online (AOL) bought Mirabilis, the company that owned ICQ. So this product came to form part of the AOL online services that also included AIM (AOL Instant Messaging), its own messenger service. According to Forrester Research, AOL is the leading company in this type of service with a market share of 52\%, while its most important competitors, Microsoft MSN Messenger and Yahoo Messenger, have 28\% and 15\% respectively.

A common characteristic of these messenger systems is that they use their own communications protocols, thereby avoiding compatibility with other products. So, unlike e-mail, where one address is enough, many instant messenger users must have several addresses.

However, there are different programmes like Trillian or PSI that enable communication between different providers. This possibility is rather awkward for the owners of messenger systems, who constantly launch new versions that are incompatible with rival products.

Now the major portals think it is time to make instant messaging more profitable. Indeed, it is a service that in 2005 will have 300 million corporative users, according to forecasts by IDC.

On the other hand, The Yankee Group estimates that only 15\% of the top companies in the United States have their own messenger system. The rest mostly use the public versions of AOL, Microsoft or Yahoo. It is, therefore, very likely that messenger systems migrate to payment corporate systems. Reuters is already working on these
lines with its service to financial companies. That links its paying customers with the services provided by AOL and MSN. The business involves getting paid for a licence and providing those paying customers with better characteristics, such as greater security or high quality videoconference connections.

It is also hoped that the incompatibility between services in the domestic market is settled by changing over to payment messenger systems, although some experts go beyond that and point out that the future of this market is to gradually replace fixed telephone services for a package of solutions that include voice through IP, videoconference services and connectivity between the different services. As usual, the important thing is to offer complete solutions to customers, in this case covering all their communications needs, be they in the home or in the company.

**What is behind the incompatibility of instant messaging services?**

**Towards an integrated service**

**Brian Subirana, IESE professor**

With the blocking of their respective instant messaging services, all three main global portals, AOL, Microsoft and Yahoo, are trying to protect their extensive user base. Together with electronic mail, instant messaging is one of the most used applications by net surfers and the three providers mentioned above have a huge base installed that uses these services. Both of the bases (messaging and e-mail) have been built up with a free subscription strategy. The existence of three different services defies the theories based on network externalities advocated by many academics and explains the growing need of integrated solutions.

In order to convince users to become customers, the messaging business will more than likely form part of a package of integral communications solutions that include Internet access, mobile phone instant messaging, payment services, electronic mail and videoconference services.

**History repeats itself**

**Sebastián Muriel, Manager of PwC (Telecommunications Sector)**

In the case of Microsoft, cutting off the communication of its MSN Messenger service from that of its competitors (AOL and Yahoo) is just one more step in taking over the instant messenger market. Likewise, the decision by the company to close down all its chat rooms may be interpreted as a way to force its users to move to the widely used Instant Messenger service. Both of these changes match the strategy already used with Windows, Office or Explorer. The power lies in the “passive” and gradual habit-forming of its products, which are incompatible with other alternatives, but massively used. Moreover, the end user will soon look for the user friendliness of the same application in the mobile phone as well as in the PC. Actions like the collaboration between Microsoft and Vodafone, combined with the non-communication between the different IM platforms, places Messenger in a better position that its rivals. History repeats itself.