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DIGITS

Gambits and gadgets in the world of technology

SECOND TIME AROUND: Back in 1993, billionaire Paul Allen tried to buy a controlling stake in an online pipsqueak whose prospects were then considered dim. But the mouse that eventually roared, America Online Inc., and its chief executive, Steve Case, resisted the overtures. The fight became so acrimonious that the co-founder of Microsoft Corp. ended up selling all of his nearly 25% stake in AOL. Since then, the pair have had little contact. Until recently, that is.

According to people close to the situation, Mr. Allen's chief investment adviser, Bill Savoy, visited Mr. Case and others at AOL's headquarters in Northern Virginia recently. Why? Mr. Allen is now one of the country's biggest cable system owners and AOL wants to offer high-speed access to its service using cable lines, among other means. Since the company has had a rocky road with AT&T Corp., now the biggest cable operator, people in the know say AOL is trying to forge relationships with other cable empires. Neither Mr. Allen nor AOL would comment.

Illustrations by Lisa Blackshear



NOTHING PERSONAL: Politicians in the nation's capital may not be reading your outraged e-mail any time soon. But their computers will. The U.S. Senate has signed a contract to buy EchoMail, a software product made by General Interactive Inc., of Cambridge, Mass. EchoMail uses artificial intelligence to "read" e-mail, figure out the subject and identify the writer's position and level of outrage. It also attempts to figure out party membership and whether the writer is a constituent. Then it sends back the senator's position.

General Interactive's president, V.A. Shiva, says the system eliminates "mismanaged e-mail that can ruin long-standing relationships." Isn't a response untouched by human hands likely to raise the level of ire? Mr. Shiva advises customers to delay responses for a day or so—giving the illusion that the recipient thought about a reply.

A FAST FLIP? Fast Company, the Boston-based business magazine that caters to the techie crowd, is growing rapidly, sparking rumors that controlling owner Mortimer Zuckerman might be looking to cash out. This year Fast Company's advertising revenue is up almost 190% to \$7.7 million, helping it surpass Upside and placing it less than \$1 million shy of a fading Wired, according to Adscope Inc.

Launched in 1995, Fast Company features off-beat tech and sociological takeouts. In recent months, people close to the matter say, Fast Company has had buyout feelers from companies including Advance Publications Inc.'s Conde Nast, which owns Wired; and Time Warner Inc. A Fast Company spokesman confirms there were approaches, but says nothing is in the works.

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