

Chapter 1

What's So Great about the Internet, Anyway?

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It's huge, it's sprawling, it's globe spanning, and it has become part of our lives. It must be . . . the Internet. We all know something about it, and most of us have tried to use it, with more or less success. (If you've had less, you've come to the right place.) In this chapter, we look at what the Internet is and can do, before we dive into details in the rest of this book.

If you're new to the Internet, and especially if you don't have much computer experience, *be patient with yourself*. Many of the ideas here are completely new. Allow yourself some time to read and reread. The Internet is a different world with its own language, and it takes some getting used to.

Even experienced computer users can find using the Internet more complex than things they've tackled before. The Internet is not a single software package and doesn't easily lend itself to the kind of step-by-step instructions we'd provide for a single, fixed program. This book is as step-by-step as we can make it, but the Internet resembles a living organism mutating at an astonishing rate more than it resembles Microsoft Word and Excel, which sit quietly on your computer. After you get set up and practice a little, using the Internet seems like second nature; in the beginning, however, it can be daunting.

So, What Is the Internet?

The Internet — also known as the *Net* — is the world's largest computer network. "What is a network?" you may ask. Even if you already know, you may want to read the next couple of paragraphs to make sure that we're speaking the same language.

A computer *network* is a bunch of computers that communicate with each other. It's sort of like a radio or TV network that connects a bunch of radio or TV stations so that they can share the latest episode of *American Idol*.

Don't take the analogy too far. TV networks send the same information to all the stations at the same time (it's called *broadcast* networking); in computer networks, each particular message is routed to a particular computer, so different computers can display different things. Unlike TV networks, computer networks are two-way: When computer A sends a message to computer B, B can send a reply back to A.

Some computer networks consist of a central computer and a bunch of remote stations that report to it (for example, a central airline-reservation computer with thousands of screens and keyboards in airports and travel agencies). Other networks, including the Internet, are more egalitarian and permit any computer on the network to communicate with any other computer. Many new wireless devices — mobile phones, Palm handhelds, BlackBerries, and their ilk — expand the reach of the Internet right into our pockets. (Hands off our wallets!)

The Internet isn't really one network — it's a network of networks, all freely exchanging information. The networks range from the big, corporate networks to tiny ones (such as the one in John's back bedroom, made from a couple of old PCs bought at an electronics parts store) and everything in between. College and university networks have long been part of the Internet, and now high schools and elementary schools are joining in. Lately, the Internet has become so popular that many households have more than one computer and are creating their own little networks that they connect to the Internet.

What's All the Hoopla?

Everywhere you turn, you can find traces of the Internet. Household products, business cards, radio shows, and movie credits list their Web site addresses (usually starting with "www" and ending with "dot com") and their e-mail addresses. New people you meet would rather give you an e-mail address than a phone number. Everyone seems to be "going online" and "Googling it."

The Internet affects our lives on a scale as significant as the telephone and television. When it comes to disseminating information, the Internet is the most significant invention since the printing press. If you use a telephone, write letters, read a newspaper or magazine, or do business or any kind of research, the Internet can radically alter your worldview.

With networks, size counts a great deal: The larger a network is, the more stuff it has to offer. Because the Internet is the world's largest interconnected group of computer networks, it has an amazing array of information to offer.

When people talk about the Internet, they usually talk about what they can do, what they have found, and whom they have met. The number of available services is too huge to list in this chapter, but here are the Big Three:

- ✓ **Electronic mail (e-mail):** This service is certainly the most widely used — you can exchange e-mail with millions of people all over the world. People use e-mail for anything that they might use paper (mail, faxes, special delivery of documents) or the telephone (gossip, recipes, love letters) to communicate — you name it. (We hear that some people even use it for stuff related to work.) Electronic *mailing lists* enable you to join group discussions with people who have similar interests and to meet people over the Net. Part IV of this book has all the details.
- ✓ **The World Wide Web:** When people talk these days about surfing the Net, they often mean checking out sites on this (buzzword alert) global multimedia hyperlinked database. In fact, people are talking more about the Web and less about the Net. Are they the same thing? Technically, the answer is “No.” But practically speaking, the answer for many people is “Pretty close.” We tell you the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth in Part III of this book.

Web sites can provide you with information ranging from travel information to how to raise chickens. You can also look at videos, listen to music, buy stuff, sell stuff, and play video games.

The software used to navigate the Web is a *browser*. The most popular browsers now are Firefox and Internet Explorer. We tell you all about them in Chapter 6.

- ✓ **Instant Messaging (IM'ing):** Programs such as Windows Messenger, Yahoo Messenger, and AOL Instant Messenger let you send messages that “pop up” on the recipient's screen. We hear tales of nimble-fingered youth carrying on upward of 13 IM sessions simultaneously. Some Web sites also provide messaging services. We tell you about IM programs in Chapter 16.

Why Is This Medium Different from Any Other Medium?

The Internet is unlike all the other communications media we've ever encountered. People of all ages, colors, creeds, and countries freely share ideas, stories, data, opinions, and products.

Anybody can access it

One great thing about the Internet is that it's the most open network in the world. Thousands of computers provide facilities that are available to anyone who has Internet access. Although pay services exist (and more are added every day), most Internet services are free for the taking after you're online. If you don't already have access to the Internet through your company, your school, your library, or a friend, you can pay for access by using an Internet service provider (ISP). We talk about some ISPs in Chapter 4.

It's politically, socially, and religiously correct

Another great thing about the Internet is that it is what one may call "socially unstratified." That is, one computer is no better than any other, and no person is any better than any other. Who you are on the Internet depends solely on how you present yourself through your computer. If what you say makes you sound like an intelligent, interesting person, that's who you are. It doesn't matter how old you are or what you look like or whether you're a student, business executive, or construction worker. Physical disabilities don't matter — we correspond with deaf and blind people. If they hadn't felt like telling us, we never would have known. People become famous (and infamous) in the Internet community through their own efforts.

The Net advantage

The Internet has become totally mainstream, and you're falling further behind the curve — and at a faster rate — if you haven't yet gotten started. Increasingly, news gets out on the Internet before it's available any other way, and the cyber-deprived are losing ground.

Here are some of the ways people use the Internet:

- ✔ **Find information:** Many Web sites have information free for the taking. Information ranges from IRS tax forms that you can print and use to help-wanted ads, real estate listings, and recipes. From U.S. Supreme Court decisions and library card catalogs to the text of old books, digitized pictures (many suitable for family audiences), and an enormous variety of software — from games to operating systems — you can find virtually anything on the Net. You can check the weather forecast, view movie listings, find your childhood sweetheart, browse catalogs, and see school closings for anywhere in the world, from anywhere in the world.

Does the Internet really reach every continent?

Some skeptical readers, after reading the claim that the Internet spans every continent, may point out that Antarctica is a continent, even though its population consists largely of penguins. Does the Internet go there? It does. A few machines at the Scott Base on McMurdo Sound in Antarctica are on the Internet, connected by radio link to New Zealand. See the polar webcam at www.usap.gov.

At the time of this writing, the largest Internet-free land mass in the world is probably one of the uninhabited islands in the Canadian arctic — Melville Island, perhaps. (You can look it up on the Internet.) We used to say New Guinea, a large jungle island north of Australia, until a reader there sent us e-mail in 1997 telling us about his new Internet provider.

Special tools known as *search engines* and *directories* help you find information (and people) on the Web. See Chapter 8 for how to search for the information you need.

- ✔ **Get an education:** Schoolteachers coordinate projects with classrooms all over the globe. College students and their families exchange e-mail to facilitate letter writing and keep down the cost of phone calls. Students do research from their home computers. The latest encyclopedias are online.
- ✔ **Buy and sell stuff:** On the Internet, you can buy anything from books about beer making to stock in microbreweries. And, you can make some cash by cleaning out your closets and selling your old junk on eBay. Software companies sell software and provide updates on the Net. Most software distribution is migrating to the Internet, where a customer can download and install programs without waiting for a CD to arrive. We talk about the relevant issues in Chapter 10.
- ✔ **Travel:** Cities, towns, states, and countries are using the Web to put up (or *post*) tourist and event information. Travelers find weather information; maps; plane, train, and bus schedules and tickets; and museum hours online. While you're at it, you can buy your airplane tickets, rent a car, and make your hotel reservations.
- ✔ **Use intranets:** Wouldn't ya know? Businesses have figured out that this Internet stuff is really useful, and they create their own, private networks — like mini-Internets. On these *intranets*, companies use Web pages for company information like corporate benefits, for filing expense reports and time sheets, and for ordering supplies. An intranet provides a way for an organization to provide stuff you can see from inside a company that folks on the outside can't see, including manuals, forms, videos of boring meetings, and, of course, endless memos. In some organizations, e-mail and intranets reduce the amount of paper wasted on this stuff.

Where did the Internet come from?

The ancestor of the Internet was the *ARPANET*, a project funded by the Department of Defense (DOD) in 1969, both as an experiment in reliable networking and to link DOD and military research contractors, including the large number of universities doing military-funded research. (*ARPA* stands for Advanced Research Projects Administration, the branch of the DOD in charge of handing out grant money. For enhanced confusion, the agency is now known as *DARPA* — the added *D* is for *Defense*, in case anyone had doubts about where the money was coming from.) Although the ARPANET started small — connecting three computers in California with one in Utah — it quickly grew to span the continent.

In the early 1980s, the ARPANET grew into the early Internet, a group of interlinked networks connecting many educational and research sites funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF), along with the original military sites. By 1990, it was clear that the Internet was here to stay, and DARPA and the NSF bowed out in favor of the commercially run networks that make up today's Internet. (And, yes, although Al Gore didn't invent the Internet, he was instrumental in keeping it funded so that it could turn into the Internet we know now.) For more information, read our Web page at <http://net.gurus.com/history>.

- ✔ **Play games:** Internet-based multiuser games can easily absorb all your waking hours and an alarming number of what would otherwise be your sleeping hours. You can challenge other players who can be anywhere in the world. Many kinds of games are available on the Web, including such traditionally addictive games as bridge, hearts, chess, checkers, and go. In Chapter 19, we tell where to find these games.
- ✔ **Find love:** People are finding romance on the Net. Singles ads and matchmaking sites vie for users. The Internet long ago stopped consisting solely of a bunch of socially challenged 22-year-old nerdy guys and now has turned into the world's biggest matchmaker, for people of all ages, genders, preferences, and life situations.
- ✔ **Heal:** Patients and doctors keep up-to-date with the latest medical findings, share treatment experience, and give one another support during medical problems. We even know of some practitioners who exchange e-mail directly with their patients.
- ✔ **Invest:** People do financial research, buy stock, and invest money online. Some online companies trade their own shares. Investors are finding new ventures, and new ventures are finding capital.
- ✔ **Participate in nonprofits:** Churches, synagogues, mosques, and other community organizations put up pages telling Web users about themselves and inviting new people. The online church newsletter *always* comes before Sunday.