

The Internet of the Future: Information Super Highway Or Dead End?

By RUSSELL ROBERTS

The Internet is just about ten years old. On the surface, that seems like an incredible statement. Something that has become as much a part of our personal and professional lives as eating, breathing and sleeping has to have been around forever, right?

Actually, no. Just as a lot has changed since 1996 (Just think of how cell phones looked back then – like large eyeglass cases with antennas sticking out of them), the Internet has also changed in the past ten years. Today it's not your father's Internet, or even your big brother's. Rather, it's faster and sleeker, with broadband applications bringing sound and video to homes and businesses at blazing speeds, rapid-fire search engines like Google gathering information in micro-seconds, and user-generated sites with names like Flickr, YouTube and MySpace making the Internet of ten years ago seem to be part of the dinosaur days.

But just at this moment, when the Internet seems poised to start delivering on its vast potential, some see trouble because of legislative action by the current Congress. They see an Internet dominated by large companies that determine what is carried on it and delivering the best content only to a select group of high-paying users.

What does the future hold for the Internet? Will it continue to be a relatively unbridled storehouse of information? Will businesses continue to be able to utilize the Internet as they wish? Or is online content and accessibility going to become restricted by a select few companies?

Is the information super highway in danger of a potentially fatal multi-vehicle accident?

Web Gems

Ironically, the Internet faces this crisis moment in its young history right at the point at which it finally seems like it's becoming the type of tool that it always promised it would be. Today, sites con-

taining user-generated content, from videos to daily living information, are exploding all over the Web.

Indeed, Newsweek magazine was so impressed by the rapid proliferation of these sites that it put the subject on the cover of its April 2, 2006 issue. Saying that these new sites was putting the "we" in "Web" and "rocking the internet," the magazine went on to extol the virtue of sites like MySpace, Flickr, and YouTube, all sites where the users supply the content, be it pictures, video, or diary entries about daily life. And supply it they do. By one estimate, YouTube visitors supply the site with 35,000 new videos per day. About 240,000 new people join MySpace every day, providing new content. The site's 48 million monthly visitors view about 11,000 pages of content per second.

The story called this "Web 2.0" and the "living Web" – the next incarnation of the Internet, one that is run by ordinary people. Newsweek felt as if these sites were the future of the Internet.

"We've only begun to scratch the surface of what the Internet can be," agreed Ronnie Daldos, head of WSI (We Simplify Internet) – Internet Consulting & Education based in Robbinsville. "High-speed and broadband access is going to bring us some killer applications." She noted that already, there has been a flood of new sites debuting for education, dating, shopping, and other on-line services. She sees these and similar sites as playing more and more of a role in daily life in the years ahead.

"As the Internet has become broader [in terms of the services it provides], it has become more a part of people's lives," said Pat McCormick, vice-president of Langhorne, PA.-based Network Alternatives, Inc.

"We're just in the early stages of where it's [Internet] going," said Peter Gibson, President of Princeton Online in Princeton. "As the technology improves, so will the content provided."

Daldos sees continued growth by user-generated sites like MySpace and

YouTube, both because of the way they are changing the way people are communicating – particularly the young people so courted by marketers – and because of the commercial opportunities involved. But some feel that the virtually unregulated quality of MySpace and other user-generated sites that are unrestricted now becoming more restrictive if advertisers are truly going to embrace them. After all, marketers like to target their message to as specific a group as possible, and currently that's impossible at MySpace. Everybody else on MySpace can view the same marketing pitch that might appeal to 13-year-old girls, and everybody else does not represent the audience that the advertiser is going for. There needs to be some guarantee that an advertiser isn't simply sending his/her message to just anybody before they invest heavily in marketing on a site. The purchase of MySpace by media giant Fox is seen as a step in the direction of reining it in and making it more acceptable to advertisers.

"I think you'll see more organization, and probably more regulation, on sites like that," agreed McCormick.

Net Neutrality

An even bigger question for the future of the Internet is, simply, whether or not the current model of a relatively free flow of information is going to continue to survive.

Some fear that because of legislation currently before Congress, large communications and cable companies are going to be able to dictate the flow of information across the Internet. The term "Net Neutrality", first coined in 2005 by a law professor to explain how a communications network moves information without inspecting it first, has now become the rallying cry of those who want the Internet to remain a free and unfettered source of all information. They fear that if the legislation pending in Congress passes, then large companies will be able to charge higher fees for certain information from