

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

certain sources, and even block information from ever traveling over the Internet. The legislation is called the "Communications, Consumer's Choice, and Broadband Deployment Act." It does not grant Net Neutrality.

The large communications and cable companies that are in favor of the bill promise that they will not restrict the Internet by blocking content. They argue that they should have the freedom to offer premium services, and want free market forces to shape the Internet of the future.

The subject has generated intense debate across – naturally – the Internet. Typing in "Net Neutrality" in any search engine will result in several million hits. Vint Cerf, now a Goggle executive and considered one of the fathers of the Internet, has testified that by not granting Net Neutrality, nothing less than the future of the Internet is at stake. Telecommunications and cable companies are poised to become "the exclusive bottlenecks, toll takers, and gatekeepers leading to and from the Internet," he said in testimony before Congress in June. Goggle, eBay, Amazon.com, and Vonage are among the advocates of Net Neutrality.

Local Internet experts are as divided as everyone else on the subject. "Once you've opened the door of free, it's hard to

close it again," pointed out Ronnie Daldos. Princeton Online's Gibson echoes that feeling, saying, "There would be a lot of pressure for it [big companies controlling Internet content] not to happen."

David Henry, sales manager of Zirius, Inc. of Princeton feels that either scenario for the future of the Internet – either restricted or not restricted - is possible right now, with the balance currently shifting toward the regulation side.

"If that bill passes, it makes the Internet very restricted," he said.

McCormick points out that businesses are increasingly outsourcing more and more of their technology departments on-line, and would like the Internet to remain as unfettered as possible so that they can continue to move in that direction. WSI's Daldos adds that business are finally "getting" the Internet, and learning how to use it to their best advantage instead of simply sticking a Web Site up and just forgetting about it, so that they have a vested interest in making sure that the Internet remains available for their use, and not controlled by a gatekeeper.

Daldos also feels that businesses will fight for an unrestricted Internet. She says that businesses are finally realizing how to use the Internet, and would not want to lose it.

Gibson summed up the hope of all

local Internet experts: "I'm really hoping that big companies will not be able to direct content to their users."

I See Point-And-Click People

But no matter how the fight for Net Neutrality goes, everyone agrees that the Internet is here to stay, and that even the Internet of just a few years from now is going to be nothing like it is today.

"I see a dynamic quality change [in the Internet] in the next few years," said Henry. "The Internet, and some ISP's (Internet Service Providers), have become as comfortable as your favorite magazine or newspaper in the past," said Gibson. "People have become at ease with navigation through them, and that will only increase."

"As devices become more portable, there will be an increasing role for the Internet to play. It will become more and more a part of our daily lives," said McCormick. "The Internet has changed the way people communicate," said Daldos. "I see a very bright future with uses that we can't even imagine now, both for personal and businesses use. I'm an Internet evangelist." ■



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