

+ Page 24 +

David F. W. Robison. Review of The Internet Companion: A Beginner's Guide to Global Networking, by Tracy LaQuey (with Jeanne C. Ryer). In The Public-Access Computer Systems Review 4, no. 1 (1993): 24-28. To retrieve this file, send the following e-mail message to LISTSERV@UHUPVM1 or LISTSERV@UHUPVM1.UH.EDU:
GET ROBISON PRV4N1 F=MAIL.

LaQuey and Ryer and have put together a guide to networking that almost reads like a novel. The text, written in nontechnical language, is organized to create and sustain interest in networking on the part of the user. Included are simple, somewhat comical diagrams that clarify concepts and systems while making a neophyte feel comfortable with terms like "Serial Line Internet Protocol." Helping to convey the authors' own excitement over networking are numerous sidebars with text taken from various sources that provide anecdotal evidence of the richness and power of the virtual culture.

The book begins with a foreword written by Vice President Al Gore, the leading government proponent of the development of the National Research and Education Network (NREN) and, when he was in the Senate, the author of two pieces of legislation designed to establish the NREN. Gore's foreword helps establish for the reader the crucial importance of networking, both now and even more so in the future.

In the preface, LaQuey argues that "If you want to stay current in the nineties, and even into the next century, you need to learn about the Internet. Futurists predict that information and access to it will be the basis for personal, business, and political advancement in the next century." Having declared the importance of the network, LaQuey explains what the book covers and how to use the examples in the book; that is, how the typography lets the user know what they are supposed to type and what the machine will answer back.

The book is divided into six chapters: "Why You Should Know About the Internet," "Internet: The Lowdown," "Communicating with People," "Finding Information," "Internet In-the-Know Guide," and "Getting Connected." There are, in addition to these chapters, a bibliography, an appendix of resources, and an index.

+ Page 25 +

The first chapter begins by putting the Internet in its historical context, comparing it to other innovations of communication, and giving a brief history of the Net itself. Right away, though, there is a sidebar that demonstrates how the Net played a crucial and exciting role in the dissemination of information during the attempted coup in the final days of the Soviet Union in August of 1991. It is this kind of illustration of the role the network can play in important events that captures the reader's attention. This is especially important if LaQuey's purpose is to motivate new or potential network users to jump into the fray, as I think it is.

Beyond the events of global importance and newsworthiness, LaQuey also describes in broad brush strokes the network community of today and traces the plans for the development of the NREN, including the role it will play in K-12 education and

the commercialization of the network. At the end of the first chapter, LaQuey recognizes that she has only whetted the reader's appetite and writes:

At this point, you're probably less concerned about the future of the Internet than you are about your own immediate future on the Internet. So stay with us as we explain a bit about how it works and some concepts you need to know before we take you to this electronic world. Onward to Chapter 2, for the "lowdown" on the Internet.

Once again working to put the new user at ease, LaQuey states at the beginning of Chapter 2 that the most important principle of the Internet is that "You don't have to fully understand how the Internet works to use it." This point is important. It helps users get over their initial fear that they don't know enough, and that they will break something in their ignorance. While it is possible to break something, most activities on the Internet are set up to be protected from both intentionally and unintentionally destructive behavior. LaQuey does not believe, however, that users should be blissful in their ignorance, for as with most things, "the more you know, the more doors are open to you."

+ Page 26 +

Chapter 2 covers the basics of how the network is "organized," how the various subnets are able to communicate through a common set of protocols and sending data in packets, the three primary applications available on the Internet (e-mail, remote login, and file transfer), how addressing works, gateways to other networks (e.g., CompuServe and BITNET), and the NSFNET Acceptable Use Policy. In one section, LaQuey deciphers a bit of technojargon that many of us take for granted: "dot speak." Where others might read an IP address as "128 period 32 period . . ." computer types say, "128 dot 32 dot. . . ." This is a minor point, but to the neophyte trying to establish a connection it can be quite confusing.

In the next chapter, readers learn about communicating with other people on the network, perhaps the most important part of networking. Starting with simple e-mail, LaQuey explains the difference between asynchronous communication and real-time "talking," how e-mail is and is not like fax, the construction of a user's address, and how to read a message (what's the header and what's the body). Included here is a list of gateway suffixes to enable Internet users to send mail to non-Internet sites. From person-to-person mail we move on to e-mail conferencing. LaQuey tells readers how lists and USENET News work, the types of lists one can subscribe to, and how to find out about the lists and groups available. In addition to asynchronous communication, readers also learn about "talk" and the Internet Chat Relay system. Appropriately, the last six pages of this chapter are devoted to "Netiquette, Ethics, and Digital Tricks of the Trade." LaQuey educates readers on how they can be more effective communicators in the network environment (neatness counts!). She also covers signatures and how to avoid high emotions on the Net, where misunderstandings are common. Interestingly, in a section on common acronyms, perhaps in deference to the "settling" of the Internet, LaQuey translates RTFM as "read the friendly manual."

From personal communication, LaQuey shifts to one of the

more difficult areas of internetworking: resource discovery, or finding information. While describing the Internet and its resources as a virtual library, LaQuey admits that "this electronic library is not as well organized as a real library." In this section, LaQuey combines description of resources and the methods for access. Picking exemplary sites, users are walked through using Telnet and anonymous FTP to find resources. Readers learn about campus-wide information systems, archives, file types, client/server architecture, Gopher, WAIS, World-Wide Web, andarchie.

+ Page 27 +

Chapter 5 is the "Internet In-the-Know Guide" which offers examples of Internet legends, including one which made me laugh out loud, and a description of some of the interactive multiplayer games that are played on the Net. There is a list of basic UNIX commands, although I'm not sure what knowing the command for invoking vi (the visual editor) will do for anyone without further instruction. There is a section devoted to security and privacy which includes advice on passwords, a warning that e-mail is not secure, and information on organizations involved in network policy issues (although only the Internet Society and the Electronic Frontier Foundation are listed in this section, others are listed in the Appendix). There is also further information on locating e-mail addresses through servers and special commands as well as sources of more detailed and technical information on the network and its resources.

The final chapter is devoted to helping users get a connection. As the network grows more popular and more "lay people" become interested in joining the community, access to the network becomes a crucial issue, and the number of opportunities grows. LaQuey does an excellent job explaining the different types of connections that are available, what ranges of functionality are available through these connections, and the costs involved. Diagrams help the reader to understand the difference between the various connections. The information in this section is directed to both personal and business users and includes options that may be available to specific user groups. The author seems to have covered all bases on this topic, which is a subject that really needs it.

The appendix that follows the wide-ranging bibliography includes source information (e-mail addresses, "snail-mail" addresses, telephone numbers, and archive sites), further reading, and software. There is also a list of Internet service providers organized by area code as well as an alphabetical list. Unfortunately, the alphabetical list with detailed contact information is a bit difficult to read.

+ Page 28 +

In the end, it is amazing that the authors have been able to cram so much into such a small book. They do this by not getting bogged down in details and by covering topics concisely. This format is ideal for new users since it is unlikely to intimidate. Almost in spite of this, the reader is provided with crucial pieces of information so that they can begin to explore the network on their own; or rather, with this companion.

Further Information on the Reviewed Book

LaQuey, Tracy (with Jeanne C. Ryer). The Internet Companion: A Beginner's Guide to Global Networking. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1993. 196 pp. \$10.95. ISBN: 0-201-62224-6.

About the Author

David F. W. Robison, Information Systems Instruction & Support, 130 Doe, University of California, Berkeley, 94720. Internet: DROBISON@LIBRARY.BERKELEY.EDU.

The Public-Access Computer Systems Review is an electronic journal that is distributed on BITNET, Internet, and other computer networks. There is no subscription fee.

To subscribe, send an e-mail message to LISTSERV@UHUPVM1 (BITNET) or LISTSERV@UHUPVM1.UH.EDU (Internet) that says: SUBSCRIBE PACS-P First Name Last Name. PACS-P subscribers also receive two electronic newsletters: Current Cites and Public-Access Computer Systems News.

This article is Copyright (C) 1993 by David F. W. Robison. All Rights Reserved.

The Public-Access Computer Systems Review is Copyright (C) 1993 by the University Libraries, University of Houston. All Rights Reserved.

Copying is permitted for noncommercial use by academic computer centers, computer conferences, individual scholars, and libraries. Libraries are authorized to add the journal to their collection, in electronic or printed form, at no charge. This message must appear on all copied material. All commercial use requires permission.
