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LIVING WITH INTERNET

By L. Susan Hayes

Since we hear so much about the Internet consuming our lives, we might wonder if we are “big” users or “little” users. At one time, I thought the net was a routine part of my workday and assumed it was becoming that way with most folk. Then I changed jobs and got a new perspective. This article explores Internet usage from two points of view. How do they compare with yours?

Some Background

I was in on the ground floor of the development of the Internet. To be technically correct, what was to become the Internet was on the ground floor *below* me. My first library job was as a summer catalog-card typist for the Institute for Defense Analysis in Arlington, Virginia, in a building across the street from the Pentagon. Sharing our building, located in the basement, was the Defense Advanced Research Project Agency, ARPA, which was inventing ARPAnet that summer of 1969. ARPAnet grew into the Internet. Had I only known what was going on just a few floors below!

The First Point of View

My first real exposure to the Internet came in 1987 when my company began using electronic mail. Very soon thereafter, I discovered ftp, file transfer programs. I used them to obtain RFCs, informal standards used to design computers. I was working for a computer manufacturing

company (in those days, Gould Computer Systems, now known as Encore Computer Corp), so we had need of leading-edge technological information. As the competition heated up, design life cycles dropped from 3-4 years to 1 year to 6 months. The Internet quickly became an important resource for the library staff.

In addition to the need for speed, the very nature of a small corporate library lends itself to adoption of the Internet as a tool. Our staff of 2 librarians and 1 clerk meant we all had to be versatile in our job assignments. The company wasn't making much money, so the library budget was static or reduced from year to year, requiring on-hand resources to be carefully and conservatively acquired. Of course, online products such as Dialog offered a good solution, permitting us to pay only as we used the information. But the Internet is an even better source; it is free. At least, it was free to us in the library, since the data processing department paid the access fee.

Our days usually started by scanning our E-mail to view listserv postings. We belonged to some 20 listservs on technical, business and management topics. Then throughout the day, we ftp'ed files or browsed web pages. Because of the x-terminal equipment on our desktops, we were able to have several windows open at once and simultaneously visible. One was usually for E-mail, one for web pages and one for internal files. This made it very easy to scan the net for an answer when an engineer or marketer walked into or phoned

into the library. There was no cumbersome protocol or wait for a modem connection. The Internet was "just another tool" in this library. In addition, the library staff was on the corporate web-page design team, so we were organizing the corporate information for outsiders-looking-in. This gave us added reason to examine net happenings. Then I changed jobs.

The Second Point of View

My new job is automation director of a major urban public library. Not only is my use of the Internet vastly different, so is the use of the reference staff and everyone else. The Internet here is not routinely used by anyone, not even by myself, at anywhere near same level as before.

The public terminals, and therefore the reference staff, have use of the local Free-Net. This offers only limited Internet access (not direct URL access), and it's only text-based (tho this will change soon). The reference staff doesn't have graphical access on their back office terminals either. The telephone reference/online search department are in the same situation. Most of these people have had Internet training, but it is not yet part of their workday. Unlike my former organization, where most of the employees used home computers for work or play on the Internet, the percentage of staff at the public library who use the net at home is very small. The public services staff knows they would like to make greater use of the Internet, but our technology is not yet ready to help them make the transition.

Only 2-3 of my staff have graphical web access at our desks. I still scan listservs daily; a different and smaller set of them than before. The library is part of county government and there is a county web site with a section for the library. We

have exciting plans for adding to this site, but limited resources (people, time) to act on those plans (at least *that* part is not so different from the previous job!). I often go several days without pulling up the web. Since I'm not looking for cut-throat competitive information anymore, the pace is more relaxed. One of the other reasons for making less use of the net is that I have many more reference resources at my disposal. The number of CD-ROM databases available on the terminal at my desk is about 10 times what I had at the corporate library. The print resources within the building are also much greater. As we all know, the nature, cost and physical ease of access of any tool plays a role in its use.

Since my job is a new position within the library, I have a wonderful challenge to increase the staff and public access to the resources on the Internet. I had become pretty complacent in accepting that the net was part of my workday. With this fresh point of view — that the net is not as pervasive as I had thought — I've been forced to re-examine the pluses and minuses of the Internet in a way I haven't needed to for several years. I'm looking forward to exploring this new territory.

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