

The Internet is a series of computers, all over the world, that are interconnected through dedicated transfer lines. Through this massive web of linkages, any computer may communicate with any other, at any time. This was developed so that should a few computers shut down or lose access for any reason, the rest of the net would be largely unaffected.

The focal points of the Net are access providers such as America Online, GENie, Prodigy, and some universities such as Texas A&M. Individual users must have an access provider to get on the Internet.

Entering the INTERNET

A whole new world of information available

By Jay Knioum
THE BATTALION

William Gibson called it the "consensual hallucination." In his novel, "Neuromancer," a tale set in a grim, high-tech future ruled by giant corporations, Gibson details an immense computer matrix into which "netrunners" could enter.

The matrix is like another reality, a virtual reality in which computer systems resemble giant fortresses in an ocean of data.

We aren't that far yet, but the Internet has still done a remarkable job of inserting itself into society. The subject endlessly pops up in magazines, newspapers and on television. The Information Age is here and so are the consequences.

Vice President Al Gore calls it the "information superhighway." Those closely affiliated with the technology say that Gore couldn't be further from the truth.

In fact, media catch phrases such as "superhighway" usually irritate those familiar with the Internet.

Daniel Harty, a systems analyst and engineer for the South Boston Community Health Center and a former Texas A&M student, said that "information superhighway" is one of many terms used to classify information networks.

"You (as a user) are not a Netjockey or Netcowboy," Harty said. "You may be a 'netrunner,' or you may 'surf the net,' or 'ride the net,' or 'go on a net run.' Improper slang tends to be annoying—better to use none than the wrong one."

Michael Edwards, supervisor for Texas A&M's Customer Help & Training at Computing Information Services (CIS), said the information superhighway is a description of interactive conferencing, such as sending and receiving e-mail and files.

"The reason for the highway analogy is the fact that we're talking about bandwidth," Edwards said. "Bandwidth is the same as a bunch of cars going from one place to another on this highway. If you've got all of us going at the same time, you've got downtown Houston at rush hour."

Whatever the analogy, the Internet has opened new doors for communication. People from all over the world can meet and discuss any topic over the Net, even if they aren't computer experts.

Brett Summers, a graduate philosophy student and CIS help desk consultant, is involved in two projects over the Net with people he would never have met otherwise.

"None of these people are what you'd call computer-literate," he said. "They're not computer-skilled people, but they all use the net to come together to exchange ideas about whatever interests them."

With the diversity inherent in the Internet, a few crumbs are bound to be picked up. As with any form of communication, harassment is not unknown on-line.

"The reports of 'cyber-creeps' are, unfortunately, valid," Harty said. "These people like to hack accounts for annoyance value, to harass and flood and generally aggravate anyone they think they can."

Harty pointed out that e-mail is still mail and is protected by the federal government. Harty said contacting the sender's systems administrator or the police will usually take care of the problem.

Harty advises users to not give out their names and personal information to anyone they don't know over the Internet.

"Change your password frequently, and don't use words or names," Harty said. "Acronyms and number combinations work the best, especially if they aren't easily guessed words or numbers. Your initials or your birthday are poor choices."

Edwards said the Texas A&M computer system has a "fire wall" which prevents Telnet access, among other things, from sites outside the University without prior University consent.

Summers said CIS is confident that hacking isn't much of a problem around A&M.

"We have some of the tightest security anywhere in the world," Summers said. "Many of the other Internet sites around the world use security software that was developed here."

The media has had a major impact on the way people view the Internet. Edwards said the media has acted as the Internet's unofficial marketing department.

"What I think the media has done, for better or for worse, is it's made people more excited and less afraid of the Internet," Edwards said.

Summers said the media has focused more on sensationalism rather than the technological achievements.

Summers said he feels that more at-

Students have easy access to Internet with A&M's computer services, help desks

By Jay Knioum
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The scene is familiar. Students walk into the RCC for the first time, and look around the room as if they just set foot on Mars.

In their hands they clutch the arcane instructions from their BANA professor that command students to seek out and retrieve the class syllabus from the ultimate evil—the Internet.

They are dumbfounded. They sit down at a terminal and stare at it. The terminal, unsympathetic, stares back. After two hours, students still have no syllabus, but have torn out the bulk of their hair in frustration.

To many students, this scene evokes bad memories. But a bad first experience with the Internet is preventable.

The Internet, contrary to popular belief, can be understood.

The Internet is simply a bunch of computers all over the world that are hooked together. The Internet is the world's largest such network, comprised of around 20 million people and 1.5 million computers worldwide.

The Internet was originally known as ARPAnet, created by the Advanced Research Projects Agency, a division of the Defense Department. It was intended to allow the military to maintain communications with its researchers during the first years of the space race.

Brett Summers, a philosophy graduate student and help desk consultant for Texas A&M Computing and Information Services (CIS), said ARPAnet was designed to maintain communication in the event of a nuclear war.

This communication is most useful during other disasters, such as the San Francisco in 1989.

"When the big quake hit San Francisco, phone, radio and TV were all cut off, but we were still in touch with those people over the net," Summers said.

The framework for what would become the Internet was laid in the form of dedicated data lines by the federal government. However, the Net has since left total government control and has drifted into the hands of the public.

At the moment, the Internet is still largely a public domain, but is quickly being absorbed by commercial interests.

Michael Edwards, supervisor for CIS' customer help and training, said Vice President Al Gore is looking into privatizing the Internet. This would bring it out of the government arena completely and charge Americans for its use.

Summers said privatizing the Internet would be damaging.

"Privatizing will destroy (the Internet)," he said. "If it becomes privatized, and the provider starts charging for traffic per, say, kilobyte, it's basically going to make it so that only large corporations and government institutions can afford to run Internet services."

The Internet has not been privatized yet, and it is easier than ever to become involved, particularly on the A&M campus. There are two ways to access the Internet. One of these is

by using the terminals in a publicly accessible area.

Edwards explained that A&M gets its Internet access from a T3 Link, which connects Texas A&M to the University of Texas. The third point in the link is the Sprint corporation, which laid the cable for this venture.

Summers said Sprint got through the gate way ahead of anyone else in preparing for the Internet age.

"Sprint is now heavily, heavily involved in the Internet, but not on a commercial level; not on a level that the average consumer is going to see," Summers said.

The other way an individual may access the Internet is through an access provider. These are commercial companies that provide Internet access

for a fee. Companies such as GENie, America Online (AOL), Prodigy, and Compuserve are all access providers.

Summers and Edwards said it is best to use local access providers instead of national services. Summers said one reason for this is to keep the interests on the Net as diverse as possible.

"Another very important reason is that on the Net, America Online, Prodigy and Delphi in particular, have had really, really bad reputation problems," Summers said. "If you actually want to get involved with people on the Internet, if you're coming from AOL, you're going to have a very hard time getting people to take you seriously."

The large services introduce hordes of untrained "newbies," or Net-amateurs, into the Internet, which sometimes angers experienced users.

"They have a complete hands-off policy of responsibility towards their users," Summers said. "They tell them nothing about etiquette, nothing about the culture that they're about to join. Basically what you've got is people walking into a party and behaving inappropriately."

As a step toward the education of newbies, Texas A&M formed the Computing and Information Services to provide answers and aid to new Internet users on and around campus.

CIS has help desks at eight locations on campus, in each of the major computer labs.

"We're sort of a launching point, I think, for just about everybody coming into Texas A&M—students, staff, faculty, researchers—anyone who needs to learn about computing and networking before they leave the University," Edwards said.

"We get people through the door onto the Net," Summers added.

CIS has worked to make

computer access easier to students by giving short courses, printing handouts on campus computer resources and by creating the Dorm Wiring Project. Underwood, Moore, Lechner, McFadden, Leggett, Dunn and Keathley Halls each have two Ethernet connections in every room.

Edwards urges anyone with questions about the computer system to stop by. "The help desk is a great place to come," he said. "We've got a ton of handouts."

In order to provide a comprehensive guide to A&M computing services, CIS has written "Computing at Texas A&M: A World of Opportunity for Students," a 56-page booklet that completely outlines and explains the Internet services that can be accessed on campus.

The free booklet is available at any help desk and provides lists of help desks on campus. The booklet also provides e-mail addresses and phone numbers of CIS personnel who can provide information on creating a computer account and password.

There are all kinds of things to play with on the Internet, and yes, they can be used to get some work done, too.

Those new to the Net are advised to wait, watch and learn. Daniel Harty, a systems analyst and engineer for the South Boston Community Health Center, said users have a lot to learn before they participate.

"Sit and watch," he said. "Read the old newfiles and get caught up. Read the FAQ (frequently asked questions) before you ask a question that's been answered a million times."

"My biggest advice for anyone who has just gotten on the Net is to spend a couple months learning what's going on before you start trying to participate," Summers said.

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Jay Knioum and James Vineyard / THE BATTALION



Robyn Calloway / THE BATTALION
Isaias Palomeque, a junior industrial engineering major, is just one of the many students who take advantage of the Internet.



Robyn Calloway / THE BATTALION
Kim Yawn, a senior biomedical science major, pulls up the Texas A&M logo through the school system.