What is the Internet, the World Wide Web, and Netscape?

UC Berkeley - Teaching Library Internet Workshops

If you are new to the Internet, it helps to have a general concept of the Internet, the World Wide Web and the other services available through the Internet.

Outline

What is the Internet?

The Internet is a network of networks, linking computers to computers sharing the TCP/IP protocols. Each runs software to provide or "serve" information and/or to access and view information. The Internet is the transport vehicle for the information stored in files or documents on another computer. It can be compared to an international communications utility servicing computers. It is sometimes compared to a giant international plumbing system. The Internet itself does not contain information. It is a slight misstatement to say a "document was found *on* the Internet." It would be more correct to say it was found *through* or *using* the Internet. What it was found in (or on) is one of the computers linked to the Internet.

Computers on the Internet may use one or all of the following Internet services:

- Electronic mail (e-mail). Permits you to send and receive mail. Provides access to discussion groups often called Listservs® after the software they operate under.
- Telnet or remote login. Permits your computer to log onto another computer and use it as if you were there.
- FTP or File Transfer Protocol. Allows your computer to rapidly retrieve complex files intact from a remote computer and view or save them on your computer.
- Gopher. An early, text-only method for accessing internet documents. Gopher has been almost entirely subsumed in the World Wide Web, but you may still find gopher documents linked to in web pages.
- The World Wide Web (WWW or "the Web"). The largest, fastest growing activity on the Internet.

What is the World Wide Web and what makes it work?

The WWW incorporates all of the Internet services above and much more. You can retrieve documents, view images, animation, and video, listen to sound files, speak and hear voice, and view programs that run on practically any software in the world, providing your computer has the hardware and software to do these things.

When you log onto the Internet using Netscape or Microsoft's Internet Explorer or some other browser, you are viewing documents on the World Wide Web. The current foundation on which the WWW functions is the programming language called HTML. It is HTML and other programming imbedded within HTML that make possible Hypertext. Hypertext is the ability to have web pages containing links, which are areas in a page or buttons or graphics on which you can click your mouse button to retrieve another document into your computer. This "clickability" using Hypertext links is the feature which is unique and revolutionary about the Web.

How do hypertext links work? Every document or file or site or movie or soundfile or anything you find on the Web has a unique URL (uniform resource locator) that identifies what computer the thing is on, where it is within that computer, and its specific file name. (More explanation on the structure of URLs.) Every Hypertext link on every web page in the world contains one of the URLs. When you click on a link of any kind on a Web page, you send a request to retrieve the unique document on some computer in the world that is uniquely identified by that URL. URLs are like addresses of web pages. A whole cluster of internationally accepted standards (such as TCP/IP and HTML) make possible this global information retrieval phenomenon that transcends all political and language boundaries.

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What is a Browser? What is Netscape and Internet Explorer?

A browser is a computer program that resides on your computer enabling you to use the computer to view WWW documents and access the Internet taking advantage of text formatting, hypertext links, images, sounds, motion, and other features. Netscape and Internet Explorer are currently the leading "graphical browsers" in the world (meaning they facilitate the viewing of graphics such as images and video and more). There are other browsers (e.g., Macweb, Opera). Most offer many of the same features and can be successfully used to retrieve documents and activate many kinds of programs.

Browsers all rely on "plug-ins" to handle the fancier files you find on the Web. Plug-ins are sub-programs stored within a browser or elsewhere in your computer especially to support special types of files you may click on. If you click on a link, and your computer does not currently have the plug-in needed for the file you clicked on, you are usually prompted with an opportunity to get the plug-in. Most plug-ins are free, and easy and safe to install on your computer; follow the instructions you are given.

The main way in which browsers differ is in the convenience features they offer for navigating and managing the Web and all the URLs you may want to keep track of. Netscape and Internet Explorer both offer the ability to e-mail documents, download

them to diskette, print them, and keep track of where you've been and sites you want to "bookmark." *Return to Outline*

Getting Connected to the Internet

To access the Internet by computer, you need a computer, a modem or other telecommunications link, and software to connect to an Internet Service Provider (links to more about ISPs). If you are not affiliated with the University or wish a private ISP, here is a site where you can find ISPs of all kinds by area code or zip code. (the URL is *http://webservices.cnet.com/html/aisles/Internet_Access.asp*). This type of technical information is beyond the scope of this tutorial and of the Teaching Library Workshops.

TV Set-Top Boxessuch as SONY's "Web-TV" are emerging as an alternative to PCs and MACs for viewing the Internet. You may wish to consult Yahoo's links, including opinions, on WebTV computer hardware technology.

Confused by all this jargon? See GLOSSARY of WWW Jargon.
Want help and instructions? The Teaching Library offers free drop-in classes on the Internet, WWW, browsers, and finding information using the Internet. Click here for Schedule of Teaching Library Courses.

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