Chapter 3.8
Education, the Internet, and the World Wide Web

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INTRODUCTION

What is the Internet?

The development of the Internet has a relatively brief and well-documented history (Cerf, 2001; Griffiths, 2001; Leiner et al., 2000; Tyson, 2002). The initial concept was first mooted in the early 1960s. American computer specialists visualized the creation of a globally interconnected set of computers through which everyone quickly could access data and programs from any node, or place, in the world. In the early 1970s, a research project initiated by the United States Department of Defense investigated techniques and technologies to interlink packet networks of various kinds. This was called the Internetting project, and the system of connected networks that emerged from the project was known as the Internet. The initial networks created were purpose-built (i.e., they were intended for and largely restricted to closed specialist communities of research scholars). However, other scholars, other government departments, and the commercial sector realized the system of protocols developed during this research (Transmission Control Protocol [TCP] and Internet Protocol [IP], collectively known as the TCP/IP Protocol Suite) had the potential to revolutionize data and program sharing in all parts of the community. A flurry of activity, beginning with the National Science Foundation (NSF) network NSFNET in 1986, over the last two decades of the 20th century created the Internet as we know it today. In essence, the Internet is a collection of computers joined together with cables and connectors following standard communication protocols.

What is the World Wide Web?

For many involved in education, there appears to be an interchangeability of the terms Internet and World Wide Web (WWW). For example, teachers often will instruct students to “surf the Web,” to use the “dub.dub.dub,” or alternatively, to find information “on the net” with the assump-
tion that there is little, if any, difference among
them. However, there are significant differences.
As mentioned in the previous section, the Internet
is a collection of computers networked together
using cables, connectors, and protocols. The con-
nection established could be regarded as physical.
Without prior knowledge or detailed instructions,
the operators of the connected computers are
unaware of the value, nature, or appropriateness
of the material stored at the node with which
they have connected. The concepts underlying
the WWW can be seen to address this problem.
As with the Internet, the WWW has a brief but
well-documented history (Boutell, 2002; Cailliau,
1995; Griffiths, 2001). Tim Benners-Lee is
recognized as the driving force behind the devel-
opment of the protocols, simplifying the process
locating the addresses of networked computers
and retrieving specific documents for viewing.
It is best to imagine the WWW as a virtual space
of electronic information storage. Information
contained within the network of sites making up
the Internet can be searched for and retrieved by
a special protocol known as a Hypertext Transfer
Protocol (HTTP). While the WWW has no single,
recognizable, central, or physical location, the
specific information requested could be located
and displayed on users’ connected devices quickly
by using HTTP. The development and refinement
of HTTP were followed by the design of a system
allowing the links (the HTTP code) to be hidden
behind plain text, activated by a click with the
mouse, and thus, we have the creation and use
of Hypertext Markup Language (HTML). In
short, HTTP and HTML made the Internet use-
ful to people who were interested solely in the
information and data contained on the nodes of
the network and were uninterested in computers,
connectors, and cables.

BACKGROUND

Educational Involvement

The use and development of the Internet in
the 1970s was almost entirely science-led and
restricted to a small number of United States
government departments and research institutions
accessing online documentation. The broader
academic community was not introduced to the
communicative power of networking until the
start of the 1980s with the creation of BITNET,
(Because It’s Time Network) and EARN (Euro-
pean Academic and Research Network) (Griffiths,
2001). BITNET and EARN were electronic com-
munication networks among higher education
institutes and was based on the power of electronic
mail (e-mail). The development of these early net-
works was boosted by policy decisions of national
governments; for example, the British JANET
(Joint Academic Network) and the United States
NSFNET (National Science Foundation Network)
programs that explicitly encouraged the use of
the Internet throughout the higher educational
system, regardless of discipline (Leiner et al.,
2000). By 1987, the number of computer hosts
connected to networks had climbed to 28,000,
and by 1990, 300,000 computers were attached
(Griffiths, 2001). However, the development of
the World Wide Web and Hypertext Markup
Language, combined with parallel development
of browser software applications such as Netscape
and Internet Explorer, led to the eventual decline
of these e-mail-based communication networks
(CREN, 2002). Educational institutions at all
levels joined the knowledge age.

FUTURE TRENDS

The advances in and decreasing costs of computer
software and hardware in the 1980s resulted in
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