

INTERNET

Spinning your own Web pages

The World-Wide Web is now providing the Internet with its own publishing system.

Bill Thompson looks at the growing popularity of personal home pages

SINCE ITS creation in 1992 the World-Wide Web has become the fastest-growing Internet service, with more than three thousand Web sites and tens of thousands of documents published.

The Web is unusual because it is largely graphical and can incorporate formatted text, pictures and even sound and video. It is also a hypertext system: each document may have links to other documents on different servers. Using the Web does not require much technical skill: unlike many other Internet services, it was designed for non-technical users.

The Web is maintained by thousands of "Web Weavers" or "Webmasters": the people who build, manage and maintain the servers, and often write the documents, too. A growing number are using the Web as a medium for the newest type of "visual publishing", making their personal pages available to a world-wide audience. I know, because I am one of them.

If you point your Web browser — NCSA Mosaic or whatever — at the URL (Uniform Resource Locator or address):

<http://www.gold.net/oblog/bill.html>
you will find a couple of screens of personal advertising, including scanned photographs of me and my children, hypertext links to some of my earlier Guardian articles, and even a pointer to the Gopher server at my old College. This is my personal "home page": an online curriculum

vita which advertises my presence to the Internet at large.

More and more people involved with the Web are setting up similar pages. They range from the minimal to the bizarre. Antya Umstätter of ART-COM in Berlin has a single image of Stalin and Mao at:

<http://www.artcom.de/~antya>

If you check out Edinburgh iconoclast Ken Johnson's home page, at:

<http://sqnooze.bus.ed.ac.uk/people/kerj/>

you will find an image of him and his ex-girlfriend along with a fill-out form to apply for the vacant post. Ken does not say whether he has received any sensible applications.

At connectivity providers Unipalm, in-house designer and comic freak Paul Smith has set up a home page at

<http://www.gold.net/lynx/biogs/paul.html>

Just to point to scans of his favourite pieces of comic artwork. Other people use the space as a curriculum vitae, like Marcus Speth, one of the founders of the online university the Global Network Academy. See:

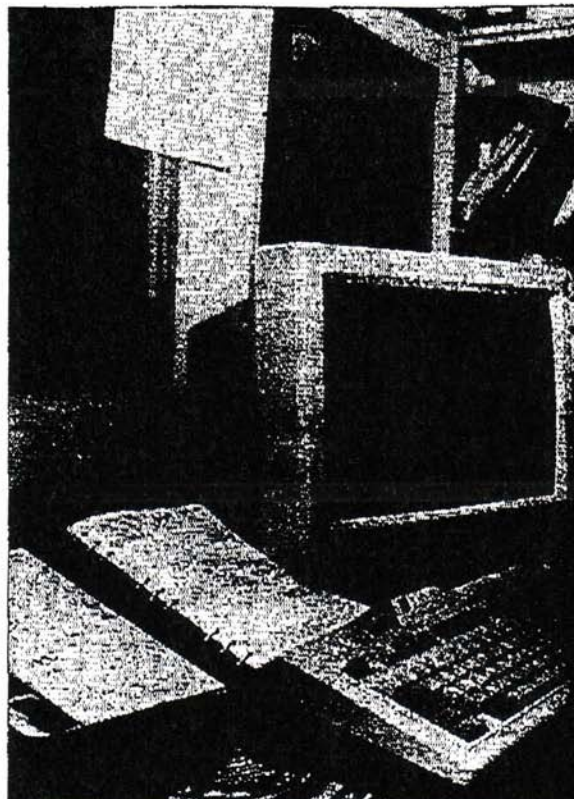
<http://info.doej.de/www/marcus.html>

Home pages started out as a simple way of indicating the authorship of a Web site or pages, rather like an e-mail signature. For example, visit

<http://www.gold.net/lynx/fringe/>

to see the FringeWeb pages put up over the Edinburgh Festival. At the bottom of each is a boUnked WGT — a pointer to my page. This establishes authorship, tells people where to find out more, and enables them to comment on the pages.

However, personal pages have grown into a new form of personal expression, and the relative newness of the World-Wide Web means that there are as yet no rules. Enrico Canessa, at Trinity University, has set up a "Who's On-Line" Web as an index to author's pages. He sees it as the first step in creating an online biographical database that could



Vanity publishing? Bill Thompson at work on his personal Web pages

be used to find people. His pages at

<http://www.tctp.trieste.it/Canessa/wholewho.html>

provide a list of people by profession, or a keyword search.

The usefulness of these extended exercises in ego-boosting is sometimes questioned... especially by those who cannot build their own. At least one information technology company is now considering banning people from setting them up on the grounds that they make it too easy for competitors to poach staff.

I have found that my home page does get consulted. After one article in OnLine I got an e-mail message from an old friend which began: "I wondered if you were the same Bill Thompson, but after checking out your home page I knew it".

My daughter Lilith even acquired a pen friend in the Web. Following a posting of mine to the Usenet newsgroup misc.kids, she got a message from a two-year-old in Canada, and they continue to exchange

e-mail. Although personal pages are currently a minor part of the Web, they show how people feel about this new Internet tool. Nobody puts their CV on a Gopher server, but everyone seems to want their own home page.

It is another indication that the Web is the application that has taken the Internet out of the hands of the technically-inclined and made it a new publishing medium.

Just as Microsoft Windows packages made electronic mail acceptable to non-IT staff, so the graphical, interactive nature of the Web is drawing in people from all areas.

And a URL on your business card says more about you than e-mail ever can.

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OnLine's online pages, where you can search back issues, are at <http://www.gold.net/online/>