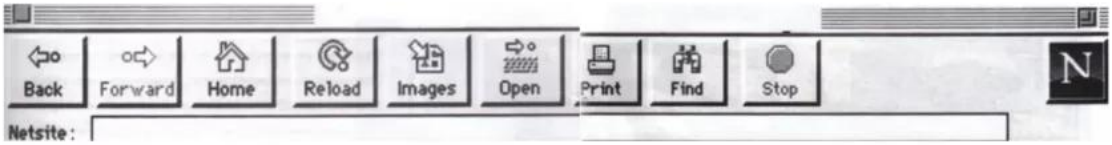
Is the Internet for me?

Surfing on the Internet is no longer a luxury but a necessity.



Welcome to the world's first global gossip channel. Upto now mention of the Internet with its load of jargon like webs and surfing, led me to believe that I was drowning without this latest glamorous plaything Then a seminar organized by the *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung* at the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute came to my rescue. After the swim and much the wiser, I would recommend that anyone with anything – from a love-letter to a project report – to send abroad, should take a look at whether the 'net' is a cheaper option than the more traditional methods of communication like letter, fax or telephone.

So what is the Internet? Originally devised by the US Army as a means to keep communication flowing, even if an individual command centre was busted, it involves a network of about 50 million dedicated computers in operation worldwide,

which enables a virtually incessant flow of computer messages from one country to another. Should one computer fail to work, the message would be routed instantly through others in the network. In each country (and there are over 150) linked to the Internet, there has to be a service provider who makes the final connection between the network and the individual user, but there is no owner to the Internet – which makes it one of the strangest phenomenons of the modern business world.

In Sri Lanka there are four service providers – Sri Lanka Telecom, Lanka Internet, Lanka Communication Services and Electroteks Network Services Private Ltd., complemented by sub agents like Information Laboratories, Cyber Cafe and Surfboard. There is also LankaNet which provides e-mail facilities to NGO's and does not take commercial accounts. To get connected from your office or home what you need are a computer, a telephone line and an additional device called modem which converts signals, enabling computers to exchange data over the telephone line. Then, as with purchasing a mobile telephone, you need to pick the local service provider, or sub agent, with the best package deal to suit your requirements and purse. Local service providers will provide you with the computer software (DOS or MS Windows), a modem. if needed, easy-to-use manuals, and network access telephone. numbers. They also provide training and support to get going.

Uses of Internet

What then are the uses of the Internet? Firstly, there's e-mail. This stands for Electronic Mail – as opposed to snail mail which is your local postman! Type a letter on your computer and theoretically you could transmit it instantly onto a friend's computer in New York. But in practice – since your link with a local service provider depends on a telephone line – your instant connectivity may not be quite so instant as all that!

Using e-mail you may exchange messages with your friends, business associates or anyone having access to e-mail, either in Sri Lanka or anywhere else in the world. The main advantage of e-mail is speed and accuracy of communication and low cost as compared with other forms of instant international communication. International e-mail messages are often 60% cheaper than faxing and don't suffer any distortion or loss of data on transmission. Take a look at this little comparison prepared by LankaNet- if you were to send one page of information to a friend in London:

• a letter will cost Rs 30 and will arrive next week

• a 3 minute phone call will cost Rs 300-400

• a fax will cost Rs 110 for one minute

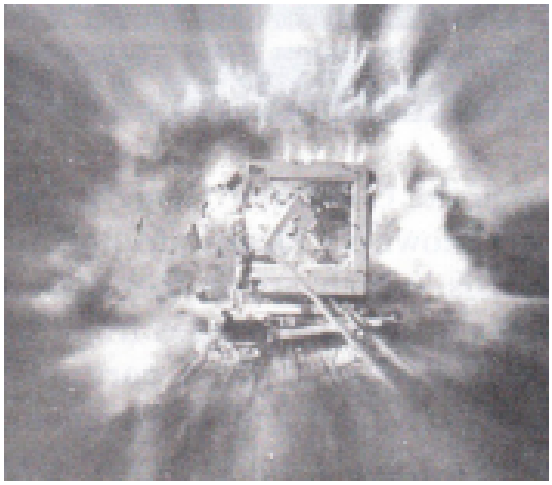
• an e-mail at LankaNet's highly subsidized rates will cost Rs 26 for a page, i.e. Rs 6 for the local call to LankaNet and Rs 20 for 4 kilobytes of international messages@ Rs 5 per kb.

The service providers are the equivalent of post offices from which e-mail messages are sent and received. You type your messages on a computer and save them as special computer files. Then you make a phone call through your computer and modem to the computer of your service provider. During one call your messages are sent, and any other messages waiting for you are collected. The messages you have received are saved in your computer and may be read and printed out at your convenience. Unlike international phone calls you don't miss them by being out of your seat.

Through e-mail, not just letters but even business data such as spread sheets with summaries of sales figures and stocks may be transmitted from let's say a sales outlet to a head office, at the end of each day, enabling its analysis to be more efficient and profitable. To keep such information confidential, passwords known only to a sender and a receiver may be used.

Sri Lanka Telecom, one of the big service providers, for e-mail charges a one-off registration fee of Rs 500 and a monthly rental of Rs 200 which allows you upto 9 e-mail addresses. Rental for over 10 mailboxes is charged at Rs 100. For per kilobyte of information mailed, you pay Rs 5 – that is roughly Rs 20 per page.

For the individual minus any 'modcons', Information Laboratories have devised ingenious ways to use the Internet. If you don't have a telephone line, or your telephone service is disrupted, Info Labs offers to receive your e-mail messages at their Colombo office and will forward them to you on a diskette via courier service, post or fax. Outgoing messages can similarly be sent to them on a diskette to be forwarded via the network, if you don't have a computer.



For the one-time or intermittent e-mail sender or net browser, Cyber Cafe at 211 Union Place might be an exciting option, as it offers the chance to have something to eat and drink in pleasant surroundings, while exploring the mysteries of the universe via the Internet. Half an hour's surfing time is charged at Rs 75 (10 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily) and there are trained people to help you with accessing the Internet and explaining its many uses.

Apart from the amorphous World Wide Web, they will show you the News Groups which enable you to look for subjects of interest under classified headings, eg. soc.culture.sri lanka, or introduce you to Telnet to which you can log-in to explore and refer the catalogues of libraries around the world. Another facet of the Internet – File Transfer Protocol – enables the transfer of computer files, such as for instance complete book manuscripts, or design drawings enabling authors and designers to operate out of home and yet interact with an office. Most intimate and gossipy of all there is *International Relay Chat* (IRC) which allows people to virtually chat, that is, send continuous comments or questions across continents, with the opportunity for instantaneous typing in of replies.

At the Surfboard at Taj Samudra, rental of an e-mail box is Rs 250 and half an hour of access to the Internet is charged at Rs 100.

Another type of Internet service is the Computer Conferences also known as Electronic Bulletin Boards, which are in fact collections of e-mail messages from different people about a particular subject. E-mail and Conferencing enable people to network with groups and individuals around the world share information, opinions, even newsletters, assemble information from many sources collaborate in research, writing or planning of events, distribute and respond to 'Action Alerts' and

ask questions that can be seen and answered by any other user watching that conference. However networking can be an expensive business when conducted internationally.

LankaNet therefore supports Sri Lankan NGO’s, voluntary groups and individuals with a concern to voice, with subsidized networking opportunities. It does not have access to the Internet but is able to transfer information from it through affiliation with the Association of Progressive Communications (APC) a group of ten, nonprofit computer networks in as many countries, who as of end 1994 had members and partners in over 90 countries and whose network was being used by over 20,000 groups.

Lankanet subscribers pay Rs 500 a month with all e-mail within Sri Lanka being free. To send or receive one page (4 kilobytes) of international e-mail costs Rs 20. Groups without a computer can call in and use the facilities at the office at 1, De Silva Road, Kalubowila, Dehiwela. The charges will be Rs 200 a month to maintain the account and mail and this also covers setting up an e-mail address, some initial documents and initial training. This category of user will be charged Rs 26 per kilobyte of e-mail sent or received.

Since the Internet is a medium which is not governed by any editorial control, the unique character of the net has been for better or worse its use as a global gossip channel! The Internet transcends barriers of censorship and political suppression and has been effectively used to air protests against human rights violations, and to raise environmental concerns.

The Internet has also been put to compassionate use in comparing medical notes

and case histories, for instance in AIDS research. It is a means to access the collective knowledge of mankind that is stored in libraries throughout the world as more and more of them come on-line. To much of this however, there is a price. Not every library can be accessed free of charge. Not every message can get on to a web-site without a charge, but here's where the different local services can help in finding ways and means.

The Web

Whatever is this thing called the Web? The World Wide Web is the most versatile and fastest moving Internet information service but is really only a part of what the Internet is all about. The apparently seamless integration of many geographically separated sources. of material in it, has caused this mass of information to be called the World Wide Web. Similar to using the 'help' in Microsoft Windows, where you can click to get more information on a highlighted word in the text, in the web, you can initiate a search by specifying keywords or topics.

The web contains documents incorporating text, graphics, images, sound and movie clips but to access the last two you require a multimedia computer. 'Clicking up' what you want is known as browsing. Some of the most commonly used web browser software packages today are Netscape, Internet Explorer, and Mosaic. To run these effectively you will need a computer with at least a "386" chip inside, and at least four megabytes of RAM. You would also need to use Microsoft Windows.

The web can be used to maintain virtual shops or stores, and deliver product information to a wider audience of potential consumers. Governments and international organizations now use the web to deliver information world- wide and even newspapers and magazines are delivered on-line. Most universities have web pages containing a wealth of information and a variety of exhibitions, museums, libraries and movies can be accessed in any country via the web.

By taking out a web page for yourself, whatever information you may place there, is

made accessible to the entire Internet community. You will also need an e-mail address for people to respond to your web page via the Internet.

For dial-up access which allows you full use of the Internet with Sri Lanka Telecom, there is a onetime sign up fee of Rs 3,000. Regular users then pay a monthly basic fee of Rs 1,000 which allows them 120 free minutes on the Internet per month. Corporate users are charged Rs 2,500 per month and get 300 free minutes. Occasional users pay only a connection fee of Rs 100 and then pay for their usage time at Rs 12 per minute during peak hours (8am – 6pm weekdays) and Rs 4 during off-peak hours.

Lanka Internet Services Ltd who pioneered the Internet services in Sri Lanka also have the corporate client in focus as a service provider, but they offer the small-time user some value-added services. For instance, they are just introducing the concept of a one-off charge of Rs 3500 with unlimited free access to the Internet for the single PC user. Another innovation coming in is a bilingual web page in which clients will be able to use the Sinhala or Tamil scripts for the first time on the web. Advertising is another service. To place one very basic computer screen page on the web for a year, their charge is Rs 20-25,000. Compare this with the price of a half-page newspaper advertisement for one day! A more standard package Ad which would run to 4 pages and include photos and text would run to Rs 30,000. For an additional charge they would link these Ads to Search Engines so that they can be cross referenced. More fancy advertisements can include sound and video clips.

Lanka Internet Services Ltd., are responsible for placing the Daily News and Sunday Observer on the web, and maintaining the Singer Home Page, which gives updates on its World Cup Cricket matches with on-line- scores, team profiles and an audio track as well.

InfoLabs is responsible for creating the web-site ‘Spotlight on Sri Lanka’, a collation of information, including commercial information on Sri Lanka (at the web address www.is.lk/is/clips/). It has also put out the Sunday Times on the web and is seeking to get more publications on-line. Their monthly charge for maintaining one page of information on the web with monthly updates, inclusive of Infopost e-mail service, is Rs 750. Information Laboratories is located at 69/ 7A, Attidiya Road, Ratmalana. Telephone 611061.