GET ONLINE OR BE LEFT BEHIND
Use of Internet and World Wide Web Services

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It's everywhere: most advertisers during the Green Bay-Dallas game displayed their World Wide Web (WWW) address at the end of each commercial, the Red Green Show on Wisconsin Public Television has a WWW address, and many magazines (including Wisconsin Agricultural) have regular columns about the WWW. You've seen it—things like http://something.orother.com--this is an address to a WWW site, also known as a homepage. The WWW (or just "web") is here to stay, and likely has something to offer you now, or will in the future. What follows is a brief overview of networks, how you can get to the WWW, and what may be on it of use to you.

The first form of computer networking was known as the "sneakernet." This involves copying a computer file onto a diskette, walking over to a computer on which you want the file to be, and copying the file from the diskette. This is still an excellent way of networking computers.

Big computers at important places like defense research labs and even a few universities were linked to one another during the 1970s and 80s, with the Department of Defense and National Science Foundation picking up the cost. Supercomputers were so rare in the 1980s that the National Science Foundation bought a few, located them around the country, and improved network access to them for scientists everywhere. The main ingredients of these early networks were the same as those needed now: high-quality communication lines, a fast computer, some specialized circuitry, and lots of smart software. The big cross-country networks joined together to form the Internet, the Information Superhighway of political rhetoric. Until about two years ago, the Internet was a tool (and playground) of scientists and academics.

Another sort of computer network is the LAN (local area network), and they are assembled and used by individual businesses to link their computers together. These are a vital part of the business computing environment. Computer hobbyists have for years linked themselves together through telephone calls to a central computer with services like Compuserve. The main Compuserve computer then allowed the personal computer users to exchange programs, stories, recipes, and all sorts of foolishness.

Finally, a few years ago the Internet was opened to all comers and configured to operate without the direct Federal support that got it started. Now the Internet is an amazing array of interlinked computers all governed by a voluntary society and kept running by the owners of the linked computers. The WWW is a set of software that allows computers with access to the Internet to exchange all sorts of information, and an enormous number of homepages. Homepages are created by businesses large and small, virtually all Federal and state agencies, and a lot of individuals who think that the rest of us would like to see their pictures and learn all sorts of foolishness about them. What is incredible about the web is the ready access that it provides to practically all business concerns, government agencies, and organizations. Entities that need to communicate with the general public can maintain attractive, colorful, and up-to-date information at very little cost.
So how does someone in rural Wisconsin connect their computer to the WWW? This is another amazing feature of the web: public access is quickly becoming available for virtually anyone with a telephone. Your computer hooks into the Internet (and WWW) by telephoning a computer operated by an Internet Service Provider (ISP). These folks have fast computers, lots of telephone modems, and an expensive link into the Internet. They provide you with the program you need to run on your computer and for a monthly fee ($10-$50 depending on ISP and how much online time you want to use) you can call them and link yourself in. No kidding, there is service to lots of towns that are not even on the Wisconsin highway map. The best way to check in your area is to call the local telephone service and ask about ISPs they are working with. Many telephone companies in Wisconsin are getting into the act themselves. Two relevant ISPs are:

- New North Network (715/365-0001)—serving the Rhinelander and Antigo areas
- CTC Net from Chibardun Telephone Cooperative (800/924-34005)—they are part of an ISP formed by a number of northern Wisconsin telephone companies

It will take more than recipes, stories, and foolishness to make the WWW a part of your regular routine. What is there on the web that makes it worth exploring?

- We are now posting all of our agricultural weather data on the WWW, including maps of evaporation (Florida now, Wisconsin in the summer), data from the Agricultural Weather Observation Network, and degree-day summations around the state (http://bob.soils.wisc.edu; you will need explore choices and the layout will change, but this address will always get you to our pages). Future products such as potato disease potential will also be made available only on the web.

- There are many sites with weather information, and they are easily found using the search tools provided by your ISP. One key weather parameter that is not freely available, however, is current radar. Access to the latest radar is available through American Weather Concepts (http://www.amerwxncept.com), and others probably. American Weather Concepts access costs $5.00/mo.

In conclusion, there may be enough on the WWW to justify your regular use now, and there will be more in the future. The technology is ready to go and so inexpensive that it certainly merits a test.

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