



CURRENTS

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THE INTERNET: Superhighway or Dirt Road?

Is the Internet more hype than help?

The fad may pass before most ever know.

Internet, Internet, everywhere an Internet. Who has not been touched by the hype? The popular media, bored with the 500 channel universe, have embraced the information superhighway. Even normally staid magazines such as *Maclean's* gush about how the Internet will change our lives more profoundly than any development in history. Some futurists argue paper documents, such as this magazine, are relics, soon to be replaced by a website.

Yet can we separate the wheat from the chaff? Just as the electric car, much of the Internet will wither away and fail to survive to the next year. Think back two years — where was the Internet?

First for the wheat. What can a farmer learn by moving onto the information superhighway? Recently I did some very casual searching using web browsers, tools

Saskatchewan Food and Agriculture supports another useful home page, as do departments in other provinces and, of course, Agriculture Canada. It appears that all their recent publications are available for printing by the user. Most major manufacturers are also placing all their print materials on home pages. Many have e-mail links allowing users to contact the company any time and without having to deal with voice mail or waiting on hold.

This has enormous potential for the farmer. Placing orders for all farm inputs will soon be possible through the Internet. *Fortune* magazine describes a three-step process of using the Internet to purchase a new car or truck. The entire transaction takes less than 30 minutes on the computer. It results in a local dealer delivering the vehicle to your driveway and picking up the trade-in. This revolution in retailing is

organize. The term "surfing the net" sounds exhilarating, but the reality is much different. Users are finding that the on-ramp to the information superhighway is usually a dirt road and non-existent in too many rural areas. Local telephone systems are often incapable of supporting the volume of users. They clog circuits designed to carry the average call of seven minutes. Internet users are often on-line for three or more hours. Cable TV promises to provide an important advantage, but this will not help most farmers who are beyond the reach of cable systems.

The web browsers are the best way to scan for interesting material. They also kick up an amazing amount of junk. New programs allow the creation of a website with ease. Late one night as I was screaming through cyberspace, I landed at Stevie's home page in New Jersey. After looking at a picture of his bedroom and reading his list of CDs (none of which I had ever heard), I decided that other things were more pressing. The Internet has no organization — that is its main advantage driving its expansion. It is also its main frustration — those who are looking for a subject index may quickly give up.

The hype will subside. Next year, a new fad may replace the Internet. Still, farmers who need to master increasing data and technical material will find it a powerful resource. If governments and the telecommunications industry deliver on their promises to move to a wired society, rural and urban residents will enjoy the power of the Internet. But for now, with busy signals and randomly disconnected lines because of the volume of users, sometimes I just turn off the computer and pick up a book. ■

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that allow one to seek out special interest areas on the Internet. I entered the term "zero-till" into my favourite browser (<http://www.altavista.digital.com>) and quickly found myself directed to the Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development home page. A few more clicks on the hot links and I was on a page that showed the application rates and costs for every herbicide registered in Canada.

This linked to detailed information on each herbicide and I paused at glyphosate, marketed as Roundup, Renegade and Laredo among other brand names. This page provided details on formulation, applications, safety and costs per acre. I mentally compared this with the advertisements for herbicides blanketing the farm press and noted more than a few differences. This could be very valuable information when dealing with a retailer promoting a particular brand.

sure to hit the chemical and agricultural implement companies very soon.

Governments will change as the Internet removes barriers. Anyone can easily get information from any government that has a home page. One can reach out to Australia and obtain technical reports on conservation tillage. If a Manitoba farmer wants to learn about zero-till, they can easily search every government and company home page from home. The growth of the Net raises the question as to why we need several governments distributing essentially the same literature on farming. The Internet could be the most important force to exposing the redundancy of having a provincial department of agriculture. We need information that is subject- and function-specific, not provincial in its orientation.

Much is frustrating about the Internet. It is growing so fast, it is impossible to

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