

They came from outer space

While the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence (SETI) project scans the radio signals from outer space for signs of intelligent life, we've been scanning the internet for signs of intelligence here on Earth — and receiving mixed signals.

The boys at Need to Know, a weekly techno-digest <www.ntk.net>, took a slug at BT recently about the continuing confusion over introducing xDSL services on a fixed monthly tariff and making permanent high-bandwidth internet connections at home a possibility.

'From hemming-and-hahing just months ago about ADSL, they've gone to shipping out truckloads of the tech,' the site reports. 'And from the standard bleating that "Ofel wouldn't like it", they're planting rumours of limited free local calls to everyone but the supposedly all-powerful regulators. "We did an internal report," we hear BT people say, "and realised we must devour our own business before someone else does".' So maybe there's intelligent life at BT after all.

Over at the BBC news site <www.news.bbc.co.uk>, a form of artificial intelligence was receiving the oxygen of publicity. A US scientist has developed a computer made of neurons taken from leeches. The device can perform simple sums, like a calculator, and thus has been nicknamed the



► **IS THERE ANYBODY OUT THERE? THE SETI TELESCOPE IN ARECIBO TRIES TO FIND OUT**

leechulator. The researchers' aim is to come up with computers that can analyse problems and devise a method of solution. 'Ordinary computers need absolutely correct information every time to come to the right answer,' said the Prof responsible. 'We hope a biological computer will come to the correct answer based on partial information, by filling in the gaps itself.' Er, but exactly how intelligent are leeches?

At any rate, you've got to be very dumb to buy anything on the internet — well, that's the conclusion you might draw from a recent survey by a

global federation of 245 consumer organisations at www.consumersinternational.co.uk. The group ordered more than 150 items over the web in 17 countries, and found that eight took more than a month to arrive, and 11 never arrived at all. Only 53 percent of sites had a return-of-goods policy; a mere 13 percent promised not to pass on personal details to other third parties; and delivery charges were not clearly spelt out on many of them.

Keeping track of the constantly evolving jargon relating to IT technology is one of our favourite sites <www.whatis.com>. Here, we recently discovered the term 'artilect', or 'artificial intellect', which is 'a computer intelligence superior to that of humans in one or more spheres of knowledge together with an implicit will to use the intelligence'.

Artilects are the concern of artificial intelligence specialists (or 'intelligists') who assume that within one or two generations, we will have computers that are more sophisticated than human brains and able to experimentally evolve their intelligence into something far beyond what humans might understand.

They also wonder whether such machines would consider human beings important enough to preserve. Judging by some of the stuff put out on the internet, we seriously doubt it.

♦ *The correct phone number for Goldmine [p177, this issue] should be 0171 335 2222.*

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