Serious PC users are being eclipsed by Internet free-loaders

Want a revolution?

Less than four years ago, the best known Internet service provider in the UK was Demon. For a tenner a month, the company popularised dial-up internet access, and people were happy to pay £120 a year to participate in the 'world wide wait'. Today, you can get it free. Those of us who continue to pay an ISP for access do so because we want guaranteed levels of service – either in terms of making a connection or free technical support.

But the 'free, gratis and for nothing' bandwagon (not just free ISPs, but also free PCs) is really on a roll. It's all that the newspapers and television seem to be full of today, eclipsing just about everything else in the world of IT technology.

According to the latest figures from Durlacher Research <www.durlacher.com>, there were just under four million subscription-free dial-up accounts in the UK in June, compared to two million paid-up users. There were more people using free services like X-Stream, Currant Bun and Line One than using Demon. And Freeserve's 1,250,000 users dwarfed the subscription accounts of AOL, Compuserve and Demon combined.

In less than a year, in the UK alone, millions of new Web surfers have been set loose onto the information superhighway, and early in the new millennium we can expect another couple of million users to have undergone their first e-initiation. It is probably one of the great mass migrations of this millennium.

It's not just free Internet access that will fuel the rush into cyberspace. Companies like Tiny, Time and a US reseller of iMacs have received widespread coverage over their plans to give away free PCs along with subscription telco accounts. On top of that, powerful integrated chips will make small wireless information appliances as ubiquitous as the mobile phone and the Walkman in the next few years.

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But is communication for the sake of it actually an empowering experience? Did the mobile phone really result in better human interaction, or just more of it? Does 'I'm on the bus, order the pizza now,' actually signify an advance for humankind through the use of new technology? It'll probably be the simpler technology that some of us have lived with for years that will finally engage with the mass market: email and simple information websites.

The hordes of new IT users are getting all the media space at the moment, because the media, as always, is obsessed about monitoring, and controlling, access to information. Though I welcome them with open arms, this isn't what PCs mean to most of us. We want richer applications that allow us to be more creative and productive, whether for leisure or business. Personally, I can't wait for the consumer-oriented freeloader-attracting hype to subside, and the media to turn its attention once again to how the PC can empower and unleash talent.

I look forward to a new century of richly featured applications developed for a low-cost local area network in a home or small business setting – where PCs will continue to stimulate economic and social advance. The PC revolution has only just begun.

Bobby Pickering, Editor