

Intimate acts and **true confessions** may be what the internet is all about, says Paul Smith.

This time it's personal



I've always been embarrassingly entranced by disk defragmenters. Ever since I had my first copy of Norton Utilities, I've found myself mesmerised by the sight of each little cluster being read, written and verified to its new home.

The only thing that saves me from despair in this desperate pastime is the knowledge — well, more of a hope, really — that I'm not the only one who does this. So, given, let's say, some propensity to mindless time wasting, why do I get so wearied by the interminable sluggishness of the internet? Why call it 56K when it's 42K? Why advertise ISDN as "only £99" when it costs over £50 a month? Well, I am nothing if not a great rationaliser. Watch this: it's important to monitor the progress of your defragmenter closely to make sure that the estimated time is accurate. Not bad, eh?

And I've got a good one for this whole web business too. The internet is a medium manically in search of its own justification. As with all new technologies, we only know how to look at it from the viewpoint of existing technologies. TV was first conceived as radio with pictures; networks as floppy-disk replacements. It is the same with the internet. DARPA-net and Janet were just WANs. But new technology, by definition, changes the whole landscape; otherwise it's not new. We're pretty sure that the internet is a lot more important than another network, but we still don't know how. However, the last couple of months have given us some clues.

We've seen the birth of Sean, George Michael in chatty mood, and Oscar and his "Our First Time" site. The birth received a lot of attention — the first to be relayed live on the internet. Promoted by an American health cable station, it made waves because of its innate privacy. In contrast, George Michael hosted an online chat wherein he promised to answer frankly any questions put to him, and to clear up any issues that might come out of it. Finally, there was the story of another very private event made public — that of Mike and Diane, two 18-year-old virgins who pledged to lose their virginity on the internet. Live. What these three events promised was a way of communicating the personal to the masses. They portend new ways of

sharing experiences that even television cannot hope to challenge. In the end, of course, all three were tempered by a very modern cynicism. Sean was indeed born live on the internet, but the birth was seen by only a few, the site www.ahn.com having been swamped and the organisers woefully ineffective in dealing with the demand. You can still view the event now, but what you'll witness is rather dull, hours of talk being followed by a few minutes of furtive, shaky cam images of doctors' backs and then a little Sean. Hardly edifying.

For pure cynicism, Our First Time www.ourfirsttime.com takes some beating. Oscar and his team so horrified his original web host, the Internet Entertainment Group www.ieg.com that it chucked him off. IEG is not a place of the most righteous propriety, hosting sites such as Manhole, Pussy.Com and Buttsville, so its organisers would have to be pretty shocked to blanch at a couple of virgins. But IEG discovered that Oscar was out to con. Go to the site now, jump to the Big Day and you'll find nothing but a page of script, telling how Mike and Diane decide not to do it after all, because Mike can't fit a condom. Very helpful.

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George Michael went online for the first time to talk about, you know, stuff. He started off by scotching any attempts to talk about That Toilet. But he did talk, candidly and wittily, about his life. I learnt more about him from that short chat than I did from all the Wham retrospectives in the world. It turns out that he's a bright, honest, self-effacing person.

The net, it seems, is slowly finding its voice. Not one voice, of course, but a multitude of voices, some callous and exploitative, some personal and engaging. And why not? That buzzword, narrowcasting, could be what the net is all about, after all: let anyone shout at the whole planet and find their audience, wherever they are. Maybe I'll hang on the line just a little bit longer.

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