



Culture club

Being a newcomer to the net is awkward enough without having to suffer the **slings and arrows of snobbery**. 'Internet elite, your time is up' says Nigel Whitfield. And, a basic guide to forms.

How long have you been using the internet? Chances are that many people who read this column have come to it fairly recently. It was, after all, only in 1994 that Demon Internet launched, providing low-cost access for many users. Prior to that, people who used the net tended to be in universities or networking companies and although access in the US was more widespread, it was still very much a tool for the educated elite. Much of that changed when AOL, still the world's largest online service, gave its users access to the net.

Paradise for some

Culture clash is just one phrase to describe the result. Yes, of course there were teething troubles: you'd expect little else when a culture that has developed over years suddenly meets a newer one, with different conventions. Of course, not everyone thought it was a good idea. Many of those who'd waxed lyrical about utopian ideas of cyberspace suddenly revealed that what they really meant was a utopia that didn't include the ordinary people who paid for access via systems like AOL. Some of this was doubtless due to the stupid doings of some AOL users, but it's a fact of life that if you have a service that anyone can join, a proportion of users will be daft (unlike a university, for instance).

What is amazing to see, however, is that despite the passage of time and the work that people like AOL have put into educating their users, the old attitudes persist. Lurk around in most newsgroups or discussion forums and you'll still see sarcastic or abusive comments about people who use particular service providers, or who are simply newcomers to the net. It was unpalatable enough when the real, old-time internet users started doing it, trying to keep their

There were once people who thought you didn't deserve to have access to the net

utopia as exclusive as Aldous Huxley's; and it's no less so when people who are relative newcomers themselves do it.

The point of the history lesson? There's no doubt that the internet can be a useful tool, and the current crop of dialup services have done a lot to make it more accessible. Yet next time you're sitting there thinking "It's only £10 a month", remember that there are many people for whom "only" and "£10" are not often used together. Many of those will undoubtedly be tempted to try out the net through the latest crop of

inducements, including those from BT and Cable & Wireless which promise a rate of around a penny a minute on top of

the cost of the phone call, or the completely free Dixon's Freeserve.

Whether or not those cheap services pose a real threat to the established players is something time will tell. But what's already apparent is the extent to which a number of ordinary net users don't like it, judging by the protestations in some newsgroups. And, it doesn't take much to imagine that many users will



▲ **AS TIME GOES ON, THE OLD PRECONCEPTIONS ABOUT AOL USERS ARE THANKFULLY STARTING TO WANE**

readily tar all those with a Freeserve address or a BT Click email account in the same way as they've done to AOL users in the past.

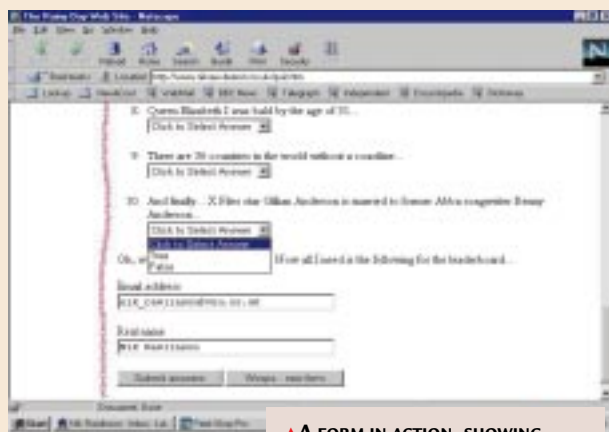
Available to all

Before you join the bandwagon and rush, sneering, to point out the spelling mistakes of "people who can't even afford a decent ISP", stop and think. What do you want the internet to be? Should it be a resource for all, welcoming people for what they say rather than criticising them for where they post from, or would you rather cast your vote with some of the old-timers.

There will certainly be turbulent times ahead as the market reacts to cheap or free inducements, but it's best to wait and see what happens rather than proclaiming that "Dixons must not be allowed to get away with it", as some have already done. In the rush to judge, it may pay to remember that there were once people who thought you didn't *deserve* to have access to the net.



FORMS: A BASIC GUIDE



A FORM IN ACTION, SHOWING DROP-DOWN MENUS, TEXT BOXES AND BUTTONS FOR SUBMITTING AND RESETTING THE PAGE

If you want to use forms, you need to understand a little about how HTML tags work. There are many good sites, and a previous article I wrote for PCW is on the web at www.stonewall.demon.co.uk/tutor/html which, while not very up to date, will explain the basics.

An HTML form is made up of HTML code between a `<FORM>` and a `</FORM>` tag. You can use any code within it, and each field is created with the `<INPUT>` tag. One of the biggest problems is that people do not correctly specify what they want to happen in the `<FORM>` tag. This should look like:

```
<FORM METHOD="POST" ACTION="somescript">
```

The "method" tells the browser how to send information. Use POST whenever you can. The alternative is GET, but there is a limit to how much information can be sent and it varies from system to system (it could be as little as 256 characters).

The POST action specifies the name of a script or program that will be run on the web server when the form is submitted, and this is where most people go wrong. Only a few browsers allow you to put `mailto:me@myaddress.com` as the action. You need to find out from your provider what scripts are supported as it will often have some for common tasks like sending mail. Don't assume that because your web design program has filled in the name of a script for the action, it's correct. It's more likely not to be. If you haven't written and uploaded a script, or your provider has not said it has one, then it won't be there.

Each field on your form is defined by an INPUT tag. For example:

```
<INPUT TYPE="TEXT" NAME="username">
```

A field could be TEXT, or PASSWORD, or CHECKBOX. You can also put `VALUE="default text"` to fill in a field with information that can be typed over, or to say what value should be assigned when a box is checked. NAME is the name of the variable to which you can refer in your script. Some, such as mail scripts written by your provider, will need specific variables named for things like the destination address and subject of the mail; these are often fields with the type set to "HIDDEN", which means they're not displayed on the page.

➤ **Adding "radio buttons"** is easy. Where only one of a series of choices can be selected, you simply use the same NAME for each one, like this:

```
<INPUT TYPE="radio" NAME="confirm" VALUE="yes" CHECKED>
```

```
<INPUT TYPE="radio" NAME="confirm" VALUE="no">
```

➤ **There are a few** types of field which work differently, though. First is the text area, a box into which you can type information. You add one of these to your page with code like this:

```
<TEXTAREA NAME="comments" ROWS="10" COLS="50">
Enter your comments here
</TEXTAREA>
```

➤ **To add a drop-down** list to your page, use the SELECT tag:

```
<SELECT NAME="mylist">
<OPTION VALUE="choice1">First entry
<OPTION VALUE="choice2">Second entry
<OPTION VALUE="choice3" SELECTED>Third entry
</SELECT>
```

You don't have to have an option already selected. If you don't, the drop-down list will appear to be blank when the page is first displayed.

➤ **Submit and reset** are two important types of field. These fields don't need a name: you could just enter

```
<INPUT TYPE="submit"><INPUT TYPE="reset">
```

and they'll work. The submit field creates a button that sends the form back to the web server, while the reset button clears the form as if you'd just loaded the page in your browser. You *must* have a submit button, but you don't *need* a reset one. Specifying a VALUE for either will use the text you give to label the button, so

```
<INPUT TYPE="submit" VALUE="Send in your order">
```

would create a button labelled "Send in your order".

➤ **A picture** can be used instead of a simple button. Most graphical browsers will let you do this. Here's how:

```
<INPUT TYPE="image" SRC="gifs/button.gif">
```

An image used like this is always assumed to be a submit button.

The browser will, however, return two extra variables, X and Y, which indicate where in the picture the user clicked, so with a clever script you could use a button bar to select different options.

Remember, you can design the most beautiful form in the world but it will come to nothing if you don't have the action set to a script that's valid on the web server where your form is hosted. Whatever design program you are using, check the code for your forms afterwards, make sure that the action is right, and that all the fields are properly named.

These are the most common problems, and if you crack those, the rest is simple. For a more detailed tutorial on forms, go to www.ncsa.uiuc.edu/SDG/Software/Mosaic/Docs/fill-out-forms/overview.html.

PCW CONTACTS

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