
Surfing the Net: Get Connected!



THE AUSTRALIAN INTERNET BOOK

By G Ebbs and J Harvey
(Woodslane Press pp 295 \$59.95)

There are somewhere around 200 books on the Internet covering all aspects from the technical to the beginner's needs. The Internet itself gives free access to numerous guides (see IETF/TERENA *Training Materials Catalogue*, May 1995). One example of an extensive coverage is EEF's (*Extended*) *Guide to the Internet* (September 1994). There are even Australian guides, such as the University of Sydney's *WWW Course* (1995), although the nature of the worldwide Internet means that most of the numerous guides contained anywhere on the Net can be used in Australia. However the large number of users of the Internet in Australia, the constant rapid expansion in use and the rapid growth in a wide variety of Australian Internet sources ranging from government to universities, schools, commerce and entertainment, indicates a market for specifically Australian books for Internet users.

The Australian Internet Book covers the general range of popular Internet materials including Gopher, Internet Relay Chat, Usenet News, E-mail, Web-searching and the Worldwide Web. There is a lengthy list of Australian sites in all categories. The speed of developments is shown by the fact that this 1995 book is illustrated with pages from the previous version of Netscape, with almost daily updates of new sites. This is not a criticism of the book, but rather a reflection of the vast rate at which the Internet is expanding both overseas and in Australia.

A practical approach is adopted, taking the reader through the steps needed to utilise the elements of the Internet. The large number of illustrations of pages called up is particularly useful. The frequent citation of the URL for an illustration is most helpful. One must agree with the authors that the Internet is like a 'huge messy library' (p 41). This is a central problem which has not yet been solved by the substantial number of search engines and lists. For this reason it is of special importance that users become fully versed in the use of bookmarks, even though these too tend to proliferate rapidly. The authors could have expanded on their discussion of the topic (p 47).

It is stressed that users should set specific goals. This is particularly the case in view of the charges now being required of all users. But this does not rule out the regular checking of general lists. An example is the well-arranged *NCSA Mosaic What's New List*. It was good to see an explanation of how to avoid reading some of the more lengthy FAQs (p 49). Although the FAQ is a very helpful concept in principle, there are so many and they often reach such lengths that short-cuts are badly needed.

Netscape is dealt with in several parts of the book (eg, pp 64 and 259) but more could have been written on the central place of browsers in the Internet today. In the

chapter on 'Searching the Net' there is a useful coverage of search tools, but the general guides such as Galaxy (briefly referred to at p 245) and Yahoo could well have been expanded on as they are very easy to use, with a simple hierarchy, vast resources and a search capacity. On E-mail (p 133) more could have been written on nicknames which are a very convenient method of simplification for frequently used addresses.

Internet users at all levels are likely to find that mailing lists are both interesting and valuable. Their ease of use is especially relevant to new users of the Net. More could have been written about mailing lists (p 142) and additional examples of foreign lists would have been helpful. 'Coverage of Usenet News' is good (p 150). One might add that the huge number of news groups frequently contains much useless material and one can waste a lot of time screening a series of apparently relevant material with little practical result. On the other hand, news groups can be a fascinating way to keep up with current events such as the Kobe earthquake and of keeping up with specialised information.

The costs of use are given (eg, p 153 and the chapter on 'Service Providers') but special stress must be placed on the potentially large expenditure involved in regular use of some of the higher cost services. 'Frequent Warnings and Helpful Hints' provide brief and useful help generally. However the reference to defamation (p 157) is too short and should be expanded with special reference to the dangers in hasty and careless messages on Usenet News and mailing lists. The list of Australian sites is detailed and most useful. It should be regularly updated by reference to the *Aaabook*.

Overall *The Australian Internet Book* is an excellent introduction to the Internet for the growing number of Australian users.

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