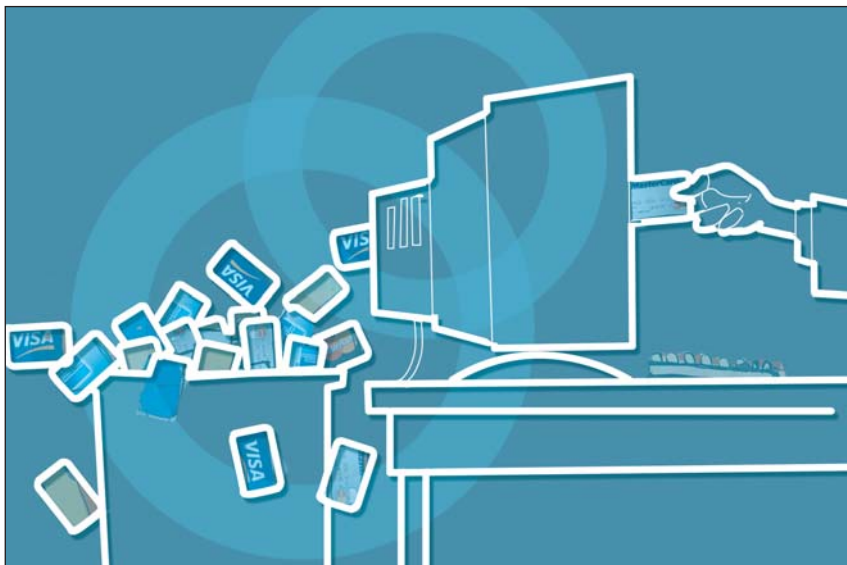


welcome

As ISPs and site managers try their hardest to impose tariffs on the information on the web, it would benefit us all to remember that the internet was first designed as a free resource, and profiting from it should perhaps be viewed with suspicion



It looks like the end of the line for internet freebies. The Financial Times and the Wall Street Journal now both charge for their content, the spread of broadband is putting up the monthly cost of access, and Microsoft – never one to miss a trick when it comes to making money – will soon start charging for MSN 8.0, its AOL-alike internet walled garden.

It had to happen some time. During the internet boom years of 1996-2000, content providers gave away their goods online with no clue as to how they would ever make money doing so. Now those still in business are trying to work out how they can start charging without losing their readership.

Community spirit

Long-term visitors to PCAdvisor.co.uk may have noticed that in the last two years we have gone from publishing online pretty much every word of the printed magazine, to pretty much none of it.

Why? Because we want you to pay us £3.25 a month to read it, rather than giving AOL £15.99. Personally I think reading a magazine the size of *PC Advisor* on a computer screen would be a miserable experience anyway; I prefer a printed copy. And the interactivity available

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on the site is something the magazine could never do – they are separate media.

If you have a technical problem or a consumer affairs issue with your PC, our forums are the place to go. You post a question and get free advice from people who get nothing out of answering other than the knowledge they just helped another human being.

It's a microcosm of the altruism on which the internet was founded and which makes the world a better place. Next time you witness or, better still, play a part in a random act of kindness between strangers, just stop and think how good it makes you feel.

Free by design

This may sound dangerously like hippy ramblings, and largely irrelevant to the hi-tech matter at hand, but there's an

important principle to bear in mind when considering the development of the internet: tools have embodied in them the intent of their inventors.

The internet's inventors wanted it to be a self-healing communications network that could survive nuclear war. That's why it's almost impossible to suppress the internet: the network interprets censorship – selective deletion – as an attack and routes around it.

In the early years the internet was developed by universities as a medium for the free distribution of information. Its user-friendly face was largely created by Cern, the nuclear physics lab, for sharing its ground-breaking research results.

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Is the future bright?

Back in 1997, when Microsoft bought a company called WebTV, I was writing a feature about whether the internet would become an entertainment medium. I interviewed a man called Jamie Minotto, an American who had headed up PC suppliers like Tandon and Tulip.

Minotto said the internet was heading for a two-way split. One branch would be sanitised TV-like channels, providing broadcast and interactive programmes; the other he called the 'Grateful Net', after the band, the Grateful Dead, a hang-out for bearded blissed-out techno-hippies with a taste for conspiracy theories and a working knowledge of Unix.

Well, the reality hasn't panned out quite as depressingly as Minotto thought. The internet is a lot more diverse than predicted, the new media movers that run successful dotcom companies wouldn't be seen dead in a tie-dyed T-shirt, and a lot of the web's content remains free and democratic. But capitalism is exerting its influence and the free stuff is getting more difficult to find by the day. Enjoy it while you can. ■

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