news

THE MONTH IN FOCUS

NEWS LEADER

E-voting has a lot to teach us – and the government. Once people feel physically involved with democracy they'll want to do it themselves, which is no bad thing – the monkey mayor of Hartlepool is actually a serious man. E-voting will help people vote when they want, but it has to help them vote for who they want, as well.

One way the government sees of reaching its population online targets is access at work, but this will be deeply flawed without privacy protection. The EU is set to restrict employers' abilities to monitor your activities at work (page 27) – a vital move if we want to empower everyone, not just PC owners.

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Intel plans to put radio capability on-chip – an ambitious project that, if it comes off, could pay real dividends.

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GameCube's launch means the triumvirate of TV gaming terror is back – Microsoft had better watch out.

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Security-minded *PC Advisor* readers think users who don't stay safe are fools.

Few hits for voting.alt

Telephone, text and internet polling tested in attempt to enthuse electorate with alternative voting methods

Local governments in Liverpool, St Albans and several other cities allowed citizens to vote using SMS (short message service) messages and the internet in the 2 May elections. However, e-voting wasn't the big hit the government hoped for.

"We were extremely disappointed with the results of e-voting," said David Allen, spokesman for the St Albans Labour party. "Turnout was worse than last year."
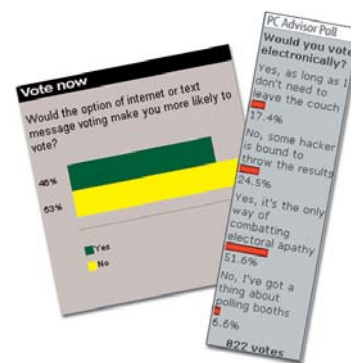
But the latest figures suggest that areas with e-voting (using kiosks) did increase turnout by an average of five percent, while online voting only bumped up numbers by one percent.

In Liverpool, turnout was fairly poor with only a slight increase (about two percent) on last year.

The news was the same from around the country, including constituencies in Sheffield and Stratford-upon-Avon. But this doesn't mean the idea is doomed to the bargain bin of history.

"This was an experiment and it's not fair to write off e-voting just because it hasn't been a huge success across these extremely limited pilot schemes," said Alex Folkes, spokesman for the ERS (Electoral Reform Society). "We haven't heard of any technical problems. The systems were safe and the results were collected effectively. From that point of view it was a success."

The ERS said it would now be studying why the systems weren't as effective at increasing participation as predicted.

"More pilots are needed to ascertain whether e-voting is a good idea. At the moment it's too early to say," added Folkes.

On a brighter note, postal votes were a huge hit. The Electoral Commission has estimated that postal votes increased participation on average by 28 percent. "Obviously this is the way forward," said a Commission spokesman.

In a recent *PC Advisor* online poll more than 50 percent said they'd welcome online voting. But national-level implementation is still some distance off.

"There is absolutely no way an e-voting system could be in place before the next general elections," said a spokeswoman for the Electoral Commission. "It's just not possible." It isn't even clear how such a system would be funded.

Intel unveils ambitious plans

Intel spiced up Microsoft's developers' conference with a peek at two of its key future technologies: the new mobile chip Banias and a performance-boosting application it calls Hyper-Threading. Banias is the first processor Intel has designed from the ground up for mobile use, said Paul Otellini, Intel's president and chief operating officer, in his keynote address at the Windows Hardware Engineering Conference in Seattle in April.

"It's architected for convergence, an uncompromised mobile platform that integrates 802.11 capability," said Otellini in a sterling display of non-standard English. Intel plans to launch the chip in 2003, and received the first test silicon in April of this year.

Banias is a glimpse of tomorrow, but Intel has its eyes on the next day, too, Otellini said. Eventually every single chip that Intel produces will contain a radio transmitter that handles wireless protocols, which will allow users to move seamlessly among networks. Among company employees this initiative is referred to affectionately as 'radio free Intel', he said.

On the desktop, Intel continues to crank out faster processors: a 2.4GHz P4 is available today, a 2.5GHz P4 is scheduled to ship in the next few months and a 3GHz Pentium 4 is expected within the year, Otellini said.

However, the company is still working to squeeze more performance from those chips, he said. To do so, Intel has created a technology it calls Hyper-Threading.

Expected to appear in 2003, Hyper-Threading is an impressive concept that involves letting an operating system use the single physical processor as if it were two processors, he said. This can lead to a performance boost as high as 30 percent, depending on the application.

Comet takes initiative on tech recycling

Electrical retailer Comet has announced its recycling initiative which could make use of nearly 90 million redundant mobile phone handsets. Comet will distribute prepaid envelopes throughout its stores for people who wish to throw away their old phones in an environmentally friendly fashion.

"We hope this will provide customers and non-customers with an easy and convenient way to dispose of unwanted goods and that other stores will follow our example," said Scott Keiller, environment and public affairs manager at Comet. The scheme is being launched before the EU WEEE directive (see page 26) comes into force, making retailers and manufacturers responsible for recycling electrical goods.

"Even when it is finalised, consumers' obligations under the WEEE directive may be difficult to enforce. We are simply trying to get people into the habit," said Keiller.

Comet will pass the handsets on to environmental telecommunications firm XS Tronix which will be responsible for recycling them. Once received, the handsets will be broken down into their component parts, enabling plastics and rare metals to be recycled or disposed of safely.

It's not funny – we just don't read any more

Britons are leaving their books to gather dust on the shelves in favour of surfing the internet.

Researchers have found that web-surfing is having a devastating effect on the hours we normally spend reading books and newspapers.

Although Britons without PCs spent more hours per week reading than their European counterparts, this figure dropped by a third after they bought a computer – the biggest fall seen by the survey in any European country.

UK subjects said they used to spend an average of 10.1 hours per week reading before they had a computer. However this figure plummeted to an average of just 6.9 hours after they bought a PC.

A spokeswoman for The European Institute of Home Computing, run by computer firm NEC, which conducted the research said: "People in all countries told us they were reading fewer books, magazines and newspapers."

But Sydney Davis, trade and industry manager for the Booksellers' Association said he was not overly concerned by the figures.

"Books are one of the biggest products sold on the internet. Sites like Amazon.co.uk have opened up a whole new market for them and you can find many rare titles on the web that were previously hard to get hold of," he said.

Davis pointed to figures from the Publishers' Association that showed the British consumer book market was worth around £2.2bn.

But although the value of the book market has grown, numbers of book sales have barely increased and sales of reference titles, which provide much of the same information people access the internet for, have collapsed.

The web could also be having a detrimental effect on the nation's health.

The European Institute of Home Computing survey showed that people in all countries spent fewer hours playing sport as a result of buying a computer.
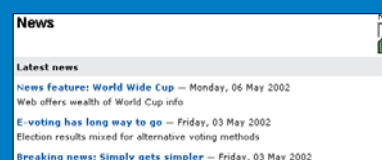
People in the UK also spend more time listening to music after buying a PC, mainly because of the increasing popularity of online file sharing.

The survey shows that the most popular use by far for home PCs is surfing the web, which accounted for 21.4 percent of people's total use of their PCs. The next most popular activities were email, at 15.4 percent, and games at 13.7 percent.

Daily news at www.pcadvisor.co.uk/news
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Domain name scammers at it again

A company called Central Web Pages Register (www.c-w-p.co.uk) has apparently been circulating a letter to all .uk registrants, demanding they pay a steep renewal fee of £225 or face being disconnected.
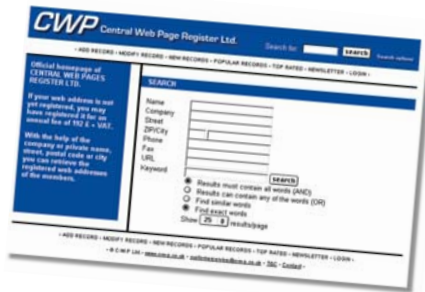
"People should just ignore this letter," said Ken Sorrie, founder of Icann-approved internet domain registrar Internetters. "[It] warns registrants that if they don't cough up, their domain name will be disconnected. This is simply untrue."

"We received this letter and contacted our domain registrar Demon immediately," said Ron Dunbar for IT company Directional Data Systems. "Demon immediately confirmed we were paid up and to ignore the letter. We have not given permission for our details to be put on the website and indeed we certainly did not take [CWP] up on its offer."

"Obviously the problem is, [if this is a scam] people will be fraudulently conned out of money." said a Trading Standards Institute spokesman. "People need to be aware that these tricksters are operating."

CWP is not registered with Icann (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers), which means it is not an official domain name registrar. Unsurprisingly CWP's telephone lines were constantly engaged when we tried to reach the firm and its elusive director is registered to a German address, at which he has so far proved impossible to contact.

If you receive a letter from CWP you should contact your local Trading Standards office, which you can find on the Trading Standards Institute's website, or Nominet (www.nic.uk) on 01865 332 211.

OUR LIVES IN NUMBERS: Virus Top 10

April's top 10 viruses have been announced by security software provider Softwin, with Win32.Klez.H at the top of the chart. The virus has enjoyed great success, affecting one in 200 messages and one in 12 systems over a single month. "I think it'll be spring's major outbreak," says Marius Gheorghescu, Softwin's head of virus research.

Source: MSN Search

1	Win32.Klez.H@mm	35.27%
2	Win32.Klez.E@mm	19.51%
3	Win32.Magistr.B@mm	5.86%
4	Win32.Nimda.A@mm	5.86%
5	I-Worm.Sircam.A	5.07%
6	Win32.Elkern.C	4.62%
7	Win32.Magistr.A@mm	4.28%
8	VBS.HappyTime.A@mm	4.21%
9	JSCoolnow.B	4.21%
10	Win32.Nimda.E@mm	3.92%
11	Other Viruses	35.27%

EU to take action on cybercriminals

The European Commission has ratified the adoption of measures to combat criminal activity against information systems, such as hacking, creating viruses and launching denial-of-service attacks (disabling systems by bombarding them with information), it said yesterday. Its approach aims to harmonise laws across the EU's 15 member states.

"There is a vast amount of network traffic, of which only a very small percentage is problematic and can be disruptive," said the Commissioner responsible for Enterprise and the Information Society, Erkki Liikanen. Although it is a small part of online activity, "cybercrime is still crime which needs to be dealt with," he said.

The proposal is technologically neutral, in that it will apply to all forms of online material, the EC said in a statement. The ultimate objective is to protect users throughout Europe and to promote improvement of security of information infrastructures, while balancing different societal interests, such as network security, law-enforcement powers and privacy protection, the EC said.

Financial losses from cybercrime shot up for the third year in a row while the number of firms that report incidents to law-enforcement agencies remains woefully low, according to the latest survey of PC crime statistics released in April by the FBI and the San Francisco-based Computer Security Institute.

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Danish hasty cash machines
Danish people will be able to access cashpoint machines through their mobile phones, thanks to a pilot scheme launched in April by technology firm NCR. The trial will involve choosing the transaction type, amount and account details prior to approaching the cashpoint. Then at the cash machine the user transmits the transaction details via an infrared beam directly to the cashpoint.

Online music swapping still popular
People are still unwilling to pay for music on the internet, a report by research firm Jupiter reveals. Court action is not enough to win the battle against free services such as Kazaa and Morpheus, the survey showed, and record companies will have to offer "compelling alternatives" to file sharing if people are ever to pay for online music. Paid-for services have so far proved to be expensive flops.

Multimedia messaging coming through
A new service may replace text-only messages. MMS (multimedia messaging services) promises to allow mobile device users to send pictures, sound and even video between devices. O2's latest PDA-phone, the XDA, has MMS capability, as has Ericsson's T68 and Nokia's 7650. Motorola and Siemens are preparing to launch their terminals during the latter half of this year.

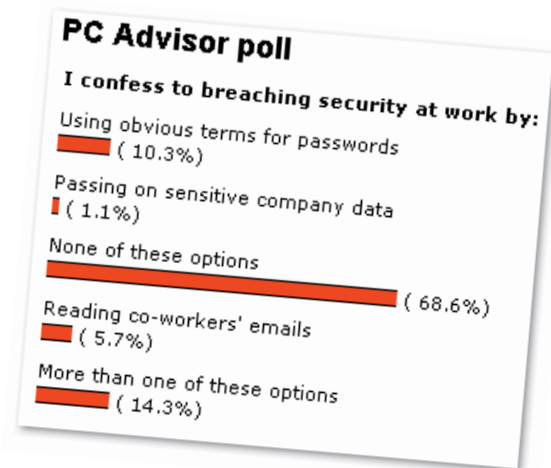### Fastest computer in the world from NEC
A supercomputer used to analyse global climate change at a Japanese research institute has stolen the title of fastest computer in the world. The vector supercomputer, built by NEC, has almost five times the performance of the previous title-holder, according to computer scientist Jack Dongarra. In a standard benchmark test, it achieved a rating of 35.6 teraflops – one trillion floating-point operations per second.

PC Advisor readers slam lax users

PC Advisor poll

I confess to breaching security at work by:

Using obvious terms for passwords (10.3%)

Passing on sensitive company data (1.1%)

None of these options (68.6%)

Reading co-workers' emails (5.7%)

More than one of these options (14.3%)

It seems *PC Advisor* readers are a security-minded lot. After we carried a story about a limited survey conducted prior to the Infosec IT security show in which people admitted to IT security breaches, most of you couldn't believe what you read.

We ran a poll to canvas your opinions, continuing until we had more votes than the survey itself – 175 votes to Infosec's 150. The results (pictured) speak for themselves. More than two thirds of those polled by us don't believe they do anything that is careless when it comes to IT security. The comments on the associated thread we started in the ConsumerWatch forum were incredulous at the parlous security practised by those originally polled.

"I work in a large, multinational company and have access to various secure programs. I do not give out any passwords to anyone – that's the whole point of them. As an aside, I won't even give my ISP password to my son!" said Paul Sanders.

Alan Godward agreed: "I work in a computer centre were I am the systems administrator and manager," he said. "When new users come in I stress the importance of keeping their password a secret and the implications of giving it to somebody else."

But although 68.6 percent of those polled said they'd never do anything bad, nearly a third had, with 14.3 percent of people saying they'd done several of the things we used as example 'no-nos'.

So, be warned. There are still a fair number of people out there who don't understand the importance of security, so we must all keep spreading the word.

Sony still winning the console game

Sony expects to ship 20 million PlayStation2 consoles in the current financial year, an increase on last year's total shipments and more than double those predicted by Microsoft for its Xbox console, according to the company.

The forecast reveals further bad news from Microsoft, which is trying to unseat Sony as the king of the computer home-video gaming business, but has admitted it is currently lagging behind its rival.

Shipments in Japan have been lower than the company originally forecast. In preparation for the Japanese launch of Xbox, Microsoft exported 250,000 consoles, along with Bill Gates to launch them.

Nintendo is also in the thick of the fray, bringing the classic triumverate feel back to the console wars. It cut the price of its GameCube console by 20 percent in Europe just days after Microsoft slashed Xbox prices in Europe by £100 and offered previous buyers extra kit to make up for their losses.

GameCube will have a recommended price around £130 – a lot less than the Xbox and around £31 less than the price Nintendo announced in January.

Xboxes are now pegged at €299 for most of continental Europe and around €329 (£199) for the UK and Ireland. This follows the typical Microsoft marketing strategy, in which the UK ends up paying the highest prices in Europe.

EU passes harder WEEE

The EP (European Parliament) announced in April that it is determined to ban consumers from throwing away electrical goods and make individual producers responsible for the cost of recycling. The WEEE (Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment) directive has been around for a while but many firms remain unsure of their obligations.

"Parliament wants to tighten up the draft directive and provide producers and individuals with clear specific responsibilities, so that individuals cannot lay the responsibility at others' feet," said an EP spokeswoman.

The EP passed a set of amendments to the draft directive, which require, among other things, that a compulsory average collection target of 6kg of electro-scrap per inhabitant per year, from private households, is achieved by December 2005.

Email monitoring in UK offices may be limited

British employers may not be allowed to monitor their employees' private email or internet use at work in the future, or use hidden cameras without staff knowledge unless a criminal investigation is under way.

According to a draft Code of Practice on data protection from the Information Commission, a copy of which has been seen by *PC Advisor*, employers should not open email when there is reason to believe they are private, even if they are sent or received using a work computer during office hours.

Employers should monitor the time spent on the internet as opposed to the sites visited or contents viewed.

This Code, due for release in June, is the Commission's interpretation of the Data Protection Act 1998, and so will act as a guide for employers unsure of the rules, an Information Commission spokesman said.

In April an influential European Parliament committee voted to remove email from a list of technologies that should be protected against unsolicited advertising, angering the internet industry.

"Why should you need prior consent to send an SMS message to someone's mobile phone, but no prior consent to send an email to the same phone?" asked Joe McNamee, European affairs manager with EuroIspa, a lobbying group.
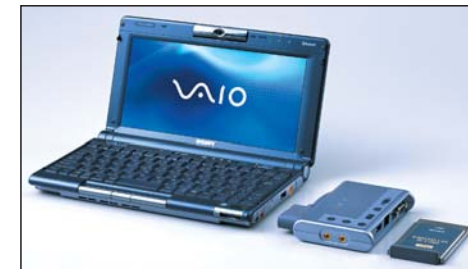
Tiniest XP notebook now out

Sony has announced its two latest addition to the Vaio range of notebook computers. The Vaio-U is the smallest Windows XP notebook to date, according to Sony. Measuring just 185x36x139mm and weighing 860g, the computer is noticeably smaller than Toshiba's Libretto mini-notebook computer. This tiny unit offers 128MB of memory running on a Transmeta Crusoe processor and packs in a 20GB hard drive.

The machine is small enough to hold with one hand on each side of the main body, gripping it with thumbs positioned on the top of the body just below the screen.

Sony has therefore placed a pointer under the right thumb, used to control the cursor, while under the left thumb are two buttons that mimic left- and right-clicking on a mouse. There is also a zoom-in button on the righthand side of the screen.

The design draws inspiration from mobile phones, where one-thumb operation for typing and sending email is becoming second nature for many.

FLASHBACK

This time last year…

Microsoft gave Hotmail a facelift, but it didn't go as planned and was delayed for two days. One main change was to the junk-mail filter, which offered an even greater degree of control over unsolicited spam. The MSN logo featured far more prominently, with the Hotmail name becoming less noticeable. The new interface also included new buttons and icons, while Swedish and Dutch were added to the list of supported languages. Microsoft also conceded that it was toying with the idea of charging users for additional storage space, among other things.

Five years ago…

A man in Issaquah, Washington state, pulled a gun on his PC and shot it several times in sheer frustration. Police eventually coaxed the man out of his home. He was immediately arrested and later sent for mental evaluation.

Four bullet holes were discovered in the hard drive and another was found in the monitor. Although nobody was injured, police said the man could face charges of unlawfully discharging a weapon. "We don't know if it wouldn't boot up or what," a police spokesman said.

20 years ago…

Sinclair was running into problems with its immensely popular ZX Spectrum – it had a backlog of some 30,000 orders. The ZX had only been on the shelves a month, but with delivery times of up to three months Sinclair later found itself in trouble with the Advertising Standards Authority for failing to meet its promise of 28-day delivery. The 48K ZX Spectrum cost around £130, and sales peaked at some 15,000 a week in 1983.

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Trouble in store for memory firms
IBM and Hitachi plan to collaborate on an as yet unnamed disk drive venture that could compete heavily with storage firms Seagate and EMC. Hitachi will own 70 percent of the company and use IBM's hard drive technology. Details are still fuzzy but the two companies have signed a 'memo of understanding'. The storage market has recently been rife with sharp price competition and decreased demand.

Vodafone to launch wireless email device
Vodafone will start selling its BlackBerry wireless email devices here in June, offering a roaming service throughout most of Europe, said the device's manufacturer, Research in Motion. The deal marks RIM's latest push on to the European market and gives it a foot in the door at Vodafone Group, one of Europe's largest mobile operators. The device first landed in Europe late last year through BT Cellnet.

Heavyweight smartcard coming soon
Gemplus' new Sumo (secure huge memory oncard) technology will have 224MB of storage, putting a new generation of applications on to smartcards. "With that amount of storage, users can download music and video on to a smartcard," said the firm. Most existing smartcards typically have between 8KB and 64KB; even the Qdos card shown at last year's Tomorrow's World show only packs 16MB.

Children demand quality online
Children may be more competent at using the internet than their parents, but they still get just as frustrated with poorly designed websites, according to research by usability think-tank the Nielson Norman Group. Sites that glossed poor content over with graphics and sound were found not to fool children. With over 65.3 million kids surfing the internet, web designers need to focus on what youngsters want.

NTL gains reprieve
Debt-ridden cable telco NTL has struck a rescue deal with its main creditors in the biggest debt write-off in history. The company, until now the biggest broadband services provider in the UK with 1.2 million customers, said it would be investing heavily in broadband services, which must come as a relief for users made jealous by rival Telewest. See our online news section for more details on this story.

Dell shows no loyalties to chip makers
After years of buying chips exclusively from Intel, it looks as though Dell will also be buying from AMD, Intel's archrival. Rumours have circulated for years about Dell switching supplier, but only recently were they confirmed when AMD's chairman Jerry Sanders III and Dell chief executive Michael Dell said AMD's 64bit Hammer family of chips could be the first AMD products to make it into Dell's hardware line-up.

Value Duron chip to be discontinued
AMD's two-year-old budget Duron processor is being retired. The company says it expects to stop producing the Duron by 2003. The news came along with the announcement this week of AMD's Opteron chip. Most industry talking heads consider the Duron a strong and high-value product caught in the crossfire of AMD's price wars with Intel and say its demise could boost prices on AMD-based value PCs.

Paper's site pay per view
The Financial Times has decided to charge up to £200 a year for access to parts of its website, www.ft.com. The site needs to raise capital after cutting 40 of its 350 online positions last year. "Since I became editor six months ago I have lost count of the number of times business leaders have praised FT.com," boasted Andrew Gowers, editor of *The Financial Times*. He said these changes would make the *FT* "even better".