The Internet and OneNet: Paving the Way to the Future of Online Communications

By Steve Heckler

The Internet Cometh

The meteoric rise of the Internet, the complex global web of computer networks joining everything from small PCs to enormous mainframes, is probably the most rapid telecommunications revolution in history. Linking fewer than 30,000 computers and enjoyed only by a privileged elite within the education and military communities just five years ago, the Internet today comprises well over 2 million computers ("hosts") in more than 100 countries. It currently serves an estimated 20 million users. If you're not on the Internet yet, you probably won't be waiting long. The number of regular Internet users is predicted to soar to over 100 million within the next four years. Internet e-mail will undoubtedly join the telephone, fax machine, and surface mail as a common and indispensable tool for business and personal communication.

To directly access the Internet, most people use an Internet-connected mainframe or workstation running the UNIX operating system. More commonly, they connect to such a machine via a modem or their personal computer's Local Area Network (as is often the case in many businesses and universities). In the past, Internet access was available only at leading educational institutions and a handful of high-tech enterprises. The recent large demand for access by individuals and businesses, however, has spawned the nationwide emergence of commercial Internet service providers. These services range from offering 1200-19,200 baud dial-up accounts for individual users, to connecting networks of hundreds or even thousands of machines to the Internet at speeds as high as 54 million baud.

The Internet, however, is not merely an overgrown e-mail network. Using the **telnet** application, users can logon to other computers throughout the Internet. For instance a Stanford University professor visiting the Technische Universität in Berlin to easily check his or her e-mail back in California. More importantly, however, a variety of information sources ranging from online university library catalogs to current meteorological statistics can be easily accessed via telnet. In addition, users can use the **File Transfer Protocol (FTP)** to download useful software and information from servers located throughout the Internet. Furthermore, Internet users may subscribe to as many as 4,000 **USENET** newsgroups (bulletin boards), with news and ongoing discussions in areas ranging from personal investing to nude sunbathing. And this is just a small sampling of what you can do on the Internet. There are numerous other utilities for finding and sorting a universe of information, games involving multiple users from throughout the world, free online magazine subscriptions, and much, much more!

OneNet + Internet = Information, Tools, and Community for Everyone

The OneNet Member Network, a global network of dial-up bulletin board systems running FirstClass server software from SoftArc of Canada, has enjoyed similarly meteoric growth. Founded in Los Altos, California, in October 1992, OneNet today includes more than 300 systems serving over a quarter of a million users in nearly two dozen countries. In fact, The OneNet Member Network is the largest graphical user interface-based distributed online system in the world. Although OneNet systems are not yet connected via high speed leased lines like those on the Internet, users of OneNet Member Network systems enjoy vastly lower fees for access and a much friendlier user interface.

So how are these two networks related? Thanks to gateway software published by several different companies, OneNet members can now indirectly connect their systems to the Internet. Dialing into an Internet site at regular time intervals, systems using one of these gateway packages can exchange e-mail with the Internet, giving their users the opportunity to correspond with a much larger audience. In addition, many of these systems offer a modest selection of USENET newsgroups. These services, which are usually offered at little or no additional charge, help make OneNet an even better value for its users.

OneNet Boulder, primary hub of The OneNet Member Network, recently established a gateway to the Internet which is already experiencing high levels of usage. Numerous other OneNet members, including the MacCommonwealth BBS in New Orleans, have already followed suit and additional members will likely establish gateways to the Internet in the near future.

During the months and years ahead, the Internet and OneNet will likely become increasingly interrelated. Like FidoNet, the world’s largest network of computer bulletin board systems, The OneNet will eventually allow routing of Internet e-mail and possibly USENET newsfeeds throughout the network, regardless of whether an individual system has set up a direct Internet gateway. In addition, The OneNet hopes to eventually establish a backbone of dedicated lines between its regional hubs and offer direct (telnet/FTP) connectivity between some of its sites and the Internet, giving users of The OneNet Member Network access to a rapidly growing universe of valuable resources.

For the time being though, connectivity between the Internet and OneNet is limited, and neither network has succeeded completely in providing easy access to the vast sea of information available in the online world. As a result, it is far better to have access to both networks than one network alone. Nevertheless, rapidly improving access to the ever-expanding Internet, combined with its own rapid growth, friendly user interface, and inexpensive fees, guarantees that The OneNet Member Network will become an even more powerful source of information, tools, and community in the months and years ahead.