editorial

W eb of Disappointment

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Many intelligent people do not browse the Web. And they do not stand to lose too much. Compared with media such as magazines, television and radio, the Internet has the lowest entry barrier to 'publishing'. This does wonderful things for the democratic spread of information, but terrible things for the aesthetics of media.

Currently, every teenager who can write three lines in HTML christens himself 'Web Developer' and puts up a site that assaults the senses of those who have the misfortune of visiting it. Our vaunted 'information superhighway' is cluttered with clumsy, irrelevant junk put up by enthusiastic amateurs. On an individual level, this is a minor mistake—and for those with wisdom and a sense of humour, a forgivable mistake. This is the price we have to pay for the freedom of the Internet.

But the larger issue is that the Internet is dominated by millions of 'professional' sites that are inane in concept, pointless in design and useless in content. Companies are progressively acquiring the habit of creating sites not for their audience, but for exhibiting that they are as technologically 'with-it' as the rival firm down the road. Content thus becomes the handiwork of people mentally trapped in the eight-inch by ten-inch limitation of a printed page. And programmers foolishly try to impress with elements that jump, bounce and sing across the pages, distracting instead of involving the user.

Despite the rather anarchistic nature of the Internet, we need as strict a criterion of judgement of Web content as we have for other mass media. It is the only way to ensure that quality accompanies Web sites, these objects of mass media and mass experience that are destined to become a part of our culture.

This rigour of user judgement does not yet exist, since most surfers are still overwhelmed by the novelty of the medium. They gush about the browsing experience itself, rather than evaluating its quality and meaning.

The Internet is an amazingly useful source of information, of breaking news and of the opinions of assorted individuals across the globe. But because of the low quality of most Web sites, it is far from delivering on its promise of being an interactive intellectual experience. Of being an environment that is alive with the immediacy of meaningful interaction. Of providing the joy of spontaneous encounters with unexpected knowledge.

Which are all the things that the Internet can do, and other media cannot.

Until those who develop Web sites understand this, many intelligent people will still have a legitimate excuse to ignore the Internet.

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