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The Internet— Using its Power, Avoiding its Chaos

Gary Breed
Editorial Director



Maybe I'm getting old (well, I am...), but I still look for substance when I need information. As we all know, online resources are a frustrating mix of highly reliable and totally unverified information. The original intent of the Internet as the primary means of rapid communications among technical professionals has been overwhelmed by unfettered access by nearly everyone.

But I wouldn't change a thing. The openness of the Internet has done too many good things. It's democratic to the extreme, even for participants who live in the least democratic societies. While some of those places have restrictions, they only slow down online activities—the desire for interaction among peers remains strong.

Sure, I get frustrated with the proliferation of e-mail spam, incomplete (or incompetent) information sources, and the general chaos that erupts occasionally due to site hacking and denial-of-service attacks. Fortunately, the Really Smart People (RSPs) who are responsible for the functioning of the Internet manage to keep it running. Kudos to them!

I try to keep the negatives in perspective. For every tidbit of bogus data on a given topic, there are dozens of valuable insights to be found. For every important reference that is not yet available online, there are many others easily accessed. The right combination of search parameters usually gets the information I need, even if it takes some time to explore all the blind alleys.

Thanks for letting me vent! The frustration of dealing with all the ups and downs of the Internet has helped formulate our magazine's policies.

The first thing we support is openness. As most of you know, all past technical articles and columns are archived as readily-accessed PDF files. Our Web site does not require registration or passwords to download the great articles we have presented in our pages.

We try to augment our information archives with things that make it easier for readers to follow up on what they see in the magazine. We have links that can speed up the process of exploring the Web sites of our advertisers, as well as companies whose activities, new products and services we have featured.

Our Web site is also a repository for information related to working with us—as authors, advertisers or simply as readers. The hard part is keeping all the information up to date. For example, the technology of magazine publishing keeps changing, and we’re probably overdue for an update on our documentation about preferred file formats for advertisements and their optimal setup parameters.

We are in the process of a major re-thinking of our online strategy. Through the rest of this year, you will see a steady increase in the resources we make available online. But first, some background:

We get LOTS of feedback on how readers get information. It’s not surprising that they tell us that their primary means of gathering product information is from company Web sites. But most of them also tell us that they prefer the maga-

zine in printed form. At first, this seems contradictory, but after some thought and discussion, it is apparent that our readers use different media for different purposes.

Undoubtedly, things will change, but right now our readers use the Internet when they are looking for something specific, but when reading a magazine they are looking for new, unexpected ideas. In other words, if you know what terms to enter in a Google™ search, that’s what you do. But how would you enter a search string that means, “Show me something new and interesting”?

The first step in our online upgrade began this past January when we started placing a PDF file of the entire magazine on our site—just as it appears in print. The only limitation is that the photos and graphics are not as sharp and clear as they are in print. This is neces-

sary to keep the file size at a practical level. (Clear, sharp printed images is a common reason readers give for preferring hard copy.)

Future additions will include an improved subscription management system, expanded links to supplier companies’ Web sites and other online resources, and we will get those updates made for ad submission formats!

We know that evolution will increase the importance of our online presence, even if the printed magazine is most readers’ current preference. That’s the main reason for increased effort to improve our dual-media role.

Right now is the perfect time to tell us what you think. What is valuable, what is unnecessary on our Web site? Tell us what you want to find when you say, “Show me something new and interesting”!