ENT on the Internet

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Abstract

Information technology has revolutionized the interactions between professionals at all levels. E-mails, information exchange, advertisement and even entertainment are all available at click of a mouse from the comfort of one's home at any time of the day or night. It is easy to use, can reach a global audience and is a cost-effective method of communication.

Key Words: Information Super Highway, www, E-mail, Internet

Information Technology has undergone explosive progress in the last two decades. Yesterday's science fiction has become today's fact, breaking all barriers and closing vast distances. Truly, the concept of Global Village has become a reality.

It is imperative for all of us to not only realize what the computers can do for us but also actually utilize this resource to its full potential. Computers, World Wide Web (www) and the Internet need not be words with unknown or little known applications; these need to become everyday terms of great benefit to all of us. Fields like Radiodiagnosis, Ophthalmology etc. are technology intensive fields where our brethren are working with computers as a matter of routine and hence, have also been able to utilize this resource better than many others.

History

It is interesting to note the US Defense Department started the Internet as a network of com-

puters for civilian research IN 1969. This was the Arpanet. Then came the move to link all major libraries via a computer network in order to protect information from being wiped out in a nuclear war. The concept was so revolutionary and made storage and retrieval of information so easy that it expanded itself to its present status of the Internet. This network of computers spanning the globe is still expanding.

What is Internet?

Internet is a global network of computers where information can be stored or retrieved. The magnitude of information exchange is so enormous that it is often called the Information Superhighway. Thus, the Internet comprises of two basic types of computers or **Servers**:

1. those that store information
2. those that regulate flow of information

These are interconnected via cables or satellite and may be "logged on" for retrieval of in-

formation. In India till date the Internet service provider has been VSNL (Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited) but now a private ISP (Satyam Online) is also operational. One would require the following to be able to log on :

1. A computer with a modem
2. A GIAS account with the service provider
 - a) shell or text only access
 - b) TCP/IP or text and graphics access
3. Software to be able to surf the web

How to connect ?

With the above ready, one dials to log on upon provision of a Username to identify the user and a password to protect the account. Once one is online, one may either type out the URLs (Universal Resource Locators) or use Search engines that perform search according to the key words given. It would be convenient and more entertaining to begin with search engines or web-directories. Table I lists some useful websites to start the journey.

Applications of the web

Not only has the Internet become a vast storehouse of information ready to be retrieved at the press of a button from the comfort of one's home or office, it has also become the fastest means of communication by e-mail or even online conferencing. All work and no play make Jack a dull boy and play is an important ingredient of what is available on the web! If you want to find someone just float your query on the web and you would be surprised at the speed and the magnitude of replies you receive. That is not all—you could float your resume if you want a job or even advertise if you are the employer. You could also provide information regarding services offered and dedicate space to patient education. Internet has provided an extremely cost effective and rapid mode for reaching global audience on the click of a mouse or press of a button.

Now there are some Internet Journals also available also are the Internet copies of some established print journals including. The Laryngoscope and the Archives!

ENT India Online is a website started with the aim of promoting interaction between colleagues of our specialty across the country or even spanning the globe. It has a page for inviting our colleagues to share their experiences with the fraternity, Physician's Forum and a page where patients can ask their queries to be answered by a panel of experts, Patient's Forum. It also has a member's directory to facilitate anyone to reach a reputable ENT Surgeon close to his or her residence. There is also a page dedicated to provide easy access to ENT resources world wide, The Gateway To ENT. The site can be accessed by typing <http://members.tripod.com/-entindia>

The medical Internet

The medical resources on the net may take one of the following shapes:

1. **Mailing lists:** Several people with common interest may get together and send e-mails to the entire group, starting a discussion on a particular subject. There are a few such groups already existing in India. The advantage of such lists or clubs as they are called is the informal and friendly discussion that could cover everything related to the subject.
2. **News groups:** These are generally based on some specific conditions e.g., cleft palate or Hearing support groups. These may serve as a tool both for exchange of information between professionals and as patient support groups.
3. **Web Sites:** These are like web based books. Several pages may be constructed and accessed from the start up page or what is more popularly known as the Home Page. ENT India Online is one such site dedicated to ENT.

4. **Index sites:** These sites basically serve to provide a link to as many resources as possible from a single up point. Bailer College of Medicine maintains such a site for many specialisations, including ENT. This is an especially packed site for reaching many sites at the click of a mouse.
5. **Remote computing Sites:** These sites in the context of medicine primarily refer to literature search sites. National Library of Medicine, US maintains a database of literature from 1966 onwards. This is popularly known as the MEDLINE. We now have some such sites serving the same purpose in India, MEDLARS etc. Internet Grateful Medicine is another effective remote computing site.
6. **Information Archives:** There exist some multimedia textbooks to supplement clinical material online. These "books" utilize multimedia tools of images and animations to even show surgical steps etc. Ear urgency online is an excellent site to see animation of entire procedure of stapedotomy in the minutest of details.

Internet publishing

From times immemorial printed matter has served as a starting point of several new directions of research. The inherent difficulties of publishing a work, the costs involved have served as automatic quality controls. The Internet is much easier to handle, much more cost effective and with potential to reach far greater audience. This has made publication easier and more cost effective but taken away the automatic quality control. It is now the onus of web page builders and supporters to enforce the quality control measures strictly and stringently. The authority and infallibility of publication has become a character of medical publishing and this has to be upheld and maintained by all of us, the users of this new medium.

One important implication of the ease of pub-

lication on the web is to relieve the backlog of publication. Most of us have suffered in silence the long wait between sending the paper for publication and receiving the acceptance and then for ultimate publication. Some reputable journals are utilizing this advantage by offering some work that shall appear only in the online version.

Another character of inline publication is its essentially informal and interactive format. This does serve to remove the aura of untouchability from medical literature but it also takes away the structure and seriousness of the realisation in many cases. The balance has to be maintained by the web editor or the web master following predefined guidelines.

This being as yet an untested forum, there exists a degree of reluctance among our colleagues to contribute significantly to an online only publication. The printed journals, too over the years have built a hierarchy of repute and acceptability. With online contributions being few from experienced sources, what position will an online only journal be able to make for itself is probably a self fulfilling prophecy of doom. However, to sound like the hardinger of hope and not like a prophet of doom we as a community need to take this issue to its rightful conclusion at the appropriate forums.

Any data that is uploaded takes up vital space at the storage computer. Space is an important criterion and translates into lack of permanence of online material. here again there have to be a set of predefined guidelines regarding the duration of availability of online matter and a form of hard copy whether as a published material or as CDs etc.

Conclusion

Information technology has changed the way a lot of people interacted earlier....one may converse with people one has never met before or keep open a channel of communication with someone separated by vast distances.

Every technology has its upside and its downside. It is possible for writers to publish their research and reach greater audience; by the same token, it is possible for a lot of unauthentic or nonsense data to be uploaded. While it is possible for those of us who are motivated enough to update our knowledge regularly through online charts and conferences, it is also possible for patients to get half baked opinions or advice based on inadequate data. It is possible also to interact with people across seas, in countries whose borders don't even touch and speed up research by sharing progress and scientific data. Being a relatively new avenue for information exchange and storage, there are few or no laws to regulate and control quality of material available on the web. It is unto each one of us to learn more and enforce self-discipline for quality control to be evident. Gradually as the medium becomes more used and

popular, laws and regulations are also likely to develop and become effective.

Table I

Useful Websites

Website	Description	Address or URL
Altavista	A search engine	www.digital.altavista.com
Hot Bot	A search engine	www.hotbot.com
Yahoo	A web directory	www.yahoo.com
ENT India Online	ENT related website	members.tripod.com/entindia
National Library of Medicine	A medical resource	www.nih.nlm.gov

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