An introduction to the Internet - application to urban animal management

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ABSTRACT

The Internet is a combination of all the ways which, to date, man has found to communicate with his fellow man.

Today the Internet is a widespread information infrastructure. Its influence reaches throughout all levels of global society as we move toward increasing use of electronic commerce, information acquisition, and community operations. No longer are our horizons limited by geographical boundaries - we can shop, study and experience cultures in any country in the world without leaving our homes.

As a new generation grows up as accustomed to communicating through a keyboard as in person, the Internet will become an increasingly important part of all our lives.

The ways in which the Internet may be used are limited more by lack of imagination than technology. To ignore the Internet as a means of promoting socially responsible pet ownership or as a resource in Urban Animal Management in Australia would be an opportunity lost.

The pet-related content on the web covers all species and all levels of interest, from pet loving children to professionals. Pets are a subject in which the majority of Australians take an active interest. The National People and Pets Survey 1995 found that 60% of Australians currently own a pet, and of those who do not, 53% would like to do so. The Internet is not only another way for the industry to reach these people but also a way for them to enhance their knowledge and share the enjoyment of their pets.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE INTERNET

For all the hype and hysteria written and spoken about the Internet it is, in truth, only another means of communication. Perhaps it is not only another means - it is a combination of all the ways which to date, man has found to communicate with his fellow man. It may be a telephone, a book, a newspaper, a radio, a television, a fax machine or even all or any combined, depending on the user's needs. If we treat the Internet as any other medium we will not be intimated by it nor use it incorrectly.

The media have tended to focus on the seedy content or instructions on bomb-making that is available on the Internet. The same people who complain about the Internet and the risk to our children are possibly the same type of people who complain about dogs and cats in the community and push for stricter controls. Only 5% of Australia's dogs and cats will pass through a shelter demonstrating that the majority of pet owners are responsible, yet the media constantly highlight the negative aspects.

The benefits of the Internet are similar to the benefits of pet ownership - they far outweigh any perceived negatives.

WHERE DID THE INTERNET ORIGINATE?

The Internet was first conceived in the early 1960s. Its history is complex and involves many aspects - technological, organisational and community.

Under the leadership of the USA *Department of Defense's Advanced Research Project Agency* it was intended to promote the sharing of super-computers amongst researchers in the United States.

In 1962 *The RAND Corporation* began research into networks for military command and control. It was to be almost 30 years before the medium was to become a source of both information and entertainment for the general public.

The term 'Internet' was used for the first time in 1982. By 1985 the Internet was already well established as a technology supporting a broad community of researchers and was beginning to be used by other communities, mainly academic, for daily computer communications. In 1992 the first audio and video broadcasts took place over the Internet and, in 1993, the first graphics-based software for viewing the web became available, allowing images to be included in web pages.

In 1994 the Rolling Stones broadcast their Voodoo Lounge tour over the web and Pizza Hut USA accepted orders for a mushroom, pepperoni with extra cheese pizza over the net. The media and public interest was well and truly aroused in this new means of communication.

In 1995 the Vatican launched www.vatican.va and Petcare Information and Advisory Service in Melbourne went online with www.petnet.com.au - the first Australian site for pet owners.

By 1996 as the Internet celebrated its 25th anniversary, approximately 40 million people were connected to the Internet worldwide in over 150 countries. More than $1 billion changed hands at Internet shopping malls.

Today the Internet is a widespread information infrastructure. Its influence reaches throughout all levels of a global society as we move toward increasing use of electronic commerce, information acquisition and community operations. No longer are our horizons limited by geographical boundaries - we can shop, study and experience cultures in any country in the world without leaving our homes.

Today some people telecommute over the Internet, allowing them to choose where to live based on quality of life rather than proximity to employment. Schools use the Internet as a vast electronic library.

As a new generation grows up as accustomed to communicating through a keyboard as in person, life on the Internet will become an increasingly important part of all our lives.

THE INTERNET IS HERE TO STAY

To those of us who remember sitting in front of a television amazed at the first scenes of man setting foot on the moon and being told it was 'one giant step for mankind', the images sent this year from mars to computers in homes through out the world were one giant step in computer technology. The Internet had to cope with over 4 million accesses to the NASA site in one day!

When we watched Neil Armstrong on the moon there would be few of us who understood the technology that allowed us to see it in our living rooms, but our children viewed Mars and knew exactly how the information was being broadcast on the Internet. Our children are so comfortable with the medium that they are publishing their own 'home pages'. Many schools have Internet sites, designed and maintained by the students. This enables them not only to share local information but also to communicate with children anywhere in the world. There are schools where every student has his/her own email address and homework is sent by email to the teacher who emails the marked paper back to the student. It is now possible to obtain a tertiary education by remote studies via the Internet.

WHY IS IT CALLED THE WORLD WIDE WEB OR WWW?

The World Wide Web is a way of describing the structure of the Internet. Computers globally connect to each other and, if it were possible to create, a 'road map' of the Internet would resemble a spider's web.

A 'web site' will have a demain name eg www.petnet.com.au Domain names are allocated in different categories e.g. .com for commercial, .org for organisations, .edu for schools and universities, .net for networks. .au in the domain name indicates that it is an Australian domain name. American domain names do not have an abbreviation, being just .com etc, as USA developed the Internet. A list of abbreviations is available on the Internet.

WHAT IS E-MAIL?

E-mail is an electronic mail transfer which allows communication between people throughout the world via their computers. An email address will be in the form of jbloggs@petnet.com.au.

WHAT IS A 'HOME-PAGE', 'INTERNET SITE' OR 'WEB-SITE'?

It is an electronic publication. It may be one simple page or it may be thousands of 'pages'. It may include audio and video and photographic images, data bases, search facilities or be plain text. It may have 'links' which connect to other sites. It may be commercial, educational or personal. It may be factual or outrageous. It may be anything you like.

WHAT IS AN URL?

'Uniform Resource Locator'! It is similar to an address or phone number, or perhaps a page in a book. It lets you locate the website. Usually in the form of http://www.petnet.com.au but may be http://www.petnet.com.au/UAM/97.html - allowing access directly to the subdirectory of the site to go directly to particular information. Many URLs will be a subdirectory of the Internet Service Providers or the University etc e.g. http://www.murdoch.edu/jbloggs/myownhomepage.html.

IS THAT ALL THERE IS TO THE INTERNET?

Certainly, not but it is how most of us will use it in our working hours. There is File Transfer Protocol (ftp) which allows us to download files from remote computers providing we have permission to access them; Internet Relay Chat (IRC) which allows us to 'chat' in real time by typing in messages; LISTS - email discussions on many subjects by subscribers to a LIST; Internet Telephone - yes, real voice conversations for simply the cost of your internet hourly connection fee to anyone, anywhere in the world so long as you both have the correct software.

HOW DO I GET ON THE INFORMATION SUPERHIGHWAY?

As a browser or viewer: a computer, a modem, a telephone line and an account with an ISP (Internet Service Provider) is required - and the software (most of which is available from your ISP and is usually free).

To set up a site: possibly all of the above, but also space on a web server. Speak to your ISP. It will also be necessary to know how to construct a site.

SO, 'LET'S GO SURFING!' - HOW DO I FIND INFORMATION ON THE INTERNET?

Use a 'search engine'. There are many available but one which is very effective is Webcrawler - www.webcrawler.com. Simply type in the subject which you are interested in and it will return a list of related sites.

IS ALL INFORMATION ON THE INTERNET CREDITABLE? HOW CAN I TELL?

One of the major difficulties with the Internet is the ease with which material may be published by anyone. The difficulty and expense of publishing and distributing hard copies of material has always, to some extent, limited the activities of the disreputable or dishonest, but here we have a medium where for a few dollars and a little knowledge anyone can globally distribute their opinions.

There are many creditable sites on the Internet where factual and accurate information on animal management or welfare and responsible ownership may be found. Many of the major universities have animal related sites, in particular overseas veterinary teaching universities such as Cornell and Purdue. However universities often give a certain amount of free space for students or faculty members to publish their own sites and sometimes material on these is nothing but a personal opinion - sometimes a quite extreme opinion!

Most major pet food companies have sites with factual responsible ownership and nutritional information for the professional and the pet owner.

The Australian Veterinary Association has an excellent site which is presently more informative for members and those within the pet industry than for the pet owner.

Information on the Internet really is a 'buyer beware' situation - do your homework and check the credibility of the author of the information or the owner of the site before taking the information as gospel!

HOW INFLUENTIAL CAN A WEBSITE BE?

The University of Santa Barbara, California, USA is conducting 'The Government and Politics on the Net Project' - a three-year study of political use of the Net aimed at understanding whether the technologies of the Net may alter patterns of political participation and engagement in public affairs by citizens in the U.S.

A number of major claims have been put forward about how the Internet may lead to a transformation of one sort or another in the nature of American democracy. One focus of the research involves demographic study of Net users, while others involve measuring patterns of political use of the Net and comparing those to models of traditional political participation.

While the results of this study will be most interesting, without doubt the Internet can have no less influence on those who use it than any other type of media - the electronic or print.

The only difference is that, to date, less citizens in Australia have access to the Internet than other mediums. But Australia's first comprehensive on-line demographic survey was conducted by www.consult (www.consultco.com.au) from May to June 1996 and showed some interesting trends.

Over 5,680 Australian Internet users answered almost 100 questions about their use of the Internet:

- 40% of Internet WWW users have started access in the past 6 months;
- the majority of people use it at least one a day;
- there are many different reasons for going on-line, but entertainment, email and research are key applications;
- a significant number of home based businesses have access to the Internet 87% of users are male;
- most users are aged between 20 and 44;
- a majority of current users have tertiary qualifications;
- the median incomes are much higher than the national average.

Research has shown that the highest accessed topic on the Internet is, not surprisingly, 'computers'. But subject by subject pet owners are way up there with them. After all 66% of Australian households own a pet, less own a computer, so why would we have more people interested in finding information on Fido or Puss than on PC or Macintosh!

So let's look at the Internet and how it can be used to promote responsibility in Australian pet owners.

WWW.PETNET.COM.AU

As an example of the utilisation of the Internet in the 'pet industry' I will use the www.petnet.com.au site of the Petcare Information and Advisory Service. Petcare was established in 1966 and its charter is to promote socially responsible pet ownership. It undertakes or commissions original research into urban animal management and the benefits of pet ownership. All this research information is now on the PetNet site and is available 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, 52 weeks of the year. Petcare's valuable research information can now be accessed by anyone from anywhere in the world, even when the office is closed.

Petcare's Selectapet computer program assists prospective owners in choosing the most suitable dog or cat breed for their lifestyle. Whilst the turn around time from the initial request to the notification of the most suitable breeds is usually about a week to ten days by mail, we have been able to make the assistance immediate by having Selectapet on the website. There is now no excuse for making an inappropriate impulse choice of breed.

There is no cheaper and more effective way for Petcare to distribute information, although hard copies are always available. Over 100,000 accesses are made to www.petnet.com.au each week and over 4000 Selectapet questionnaires are processed online during the same period.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ONLINE

Unfortunately when searching the Internet for Council sites I found many attractive sites which seemed geared more to promoting the area, or the Councillors, than to educating residents. How many ratepayers will want to visit more than once when what they find are Council's Management Plans, Council's Codes, Messages from the CEO and Council's Visions? The information on animal management appears to be buried so deep under images of the councillors, adminsterial information, library hours etc that it is unlikely to be found by those very people it needs to reach - the pet owning ratepayer.

It is important that when local government is setting up a website it is structured so that the responsible ownership message is accessible from the first level of the site and is couched in a warm and friendly way which will encourage people to view it. A link to 'Local Law No 222 for Animal Management' is less likely to encourage a visit than 'Caring for Dogs and Cats in the City of ....'.

One of the few Australian local government sites which has more than registration fees and requirements for permits in their 'animal' section is the City of Manningham in Victoria. They have a link to animal information on their first page which leads to information on reducing barking, a clarification of the dangerous dog laws, information on low cost desexing etc. Whilst, having read it once, you may not find a reason to return regularly, at least the information is informative and likely to lead to an owner more educated in responsibility.

It is futile to spend any amount of money, time and effort on building a site which no one will want to read. Consider a website as a medium with which we are all more familiar - a book. The first attraction to take a book off a shelf is usually an attractive cover. Book publishers spend a great deal of time considering graphics and colours for a cover, as well as a catchy title. But, if the content is dry and boring you are unlikely to finish reading the book right through or to recommend it to your friends.

HOW TO GET VALUE FOR MONEY FROM YOUR WEBSITE

Many councils assist schools with talks to students who are tomorrow's pet owners, but most are limited by the cost and time factors. Most schools now have Internet access and developing a site which will encourage visits from students at schools within your area is an excellent way to promote your responsible pet ownership program whilst using actual manpower for the more pressing issues of animal management. The more adventuresome might like to have a personal presence by including either video conferencing or video footage and sound in the website.

If the end result of animal management is improving lifestyles for both pets and owners then the sites could include the contact numbers and hours of local veterinarians, after hours emergency numbers, dog training and boarding establishments in the local area and perhaps lost and found pets.

The ways in which the Internet may be used are limited more by lack of imagination than technology. If your Council has a website or is considering developing one, speak to the webmaster about the possibility of making your animal management information more easily found and more user friendly.

ANIMAL WELFARE ON THE WEB

Animal Welfare organisations around the world have quickly recognised the benefits of the website. All welfare shelters are well versed in public relations as they depend on publicity not only to rehome animals but also to generate donations and bequests. Unfortunately it is often the emotion of guilt that is evoked in those reading the message - guilt that humanity can be so uncaring and cruel to animals. The danger in this is that we build insensitivity by bombarding people with a negative message and, in some people, the belief that if 30,000 other people dumped their pets last year then what harm does one more do!

One of the most inspiring and well designed websites is that of the San Francisco SPCA. Those who were present at the 1996 Urban Animal Management Conference will recall the enlightening presentation by Richard Avanzino from the San Francisco SPCA. The website is one of hope and good stories from this no kill shelter. It tells of the innovative steps they have taken to gain the support of the community; it has a database of animals available for adoption complete with photos and heart warming descriptions of the dog or cat, including its personality. An hour spent browsing this site would never be boring. It is an education in how to build a welfare website as well as responsible ownership, animal care, innovative programs. Most importantly it puts a value on pets. If you only bookmark two websites one should be the San Francisco SPCA and of course the other should be PetNet!

Australian Shelters with websites are the RSPCA (nationally), the Lost Dogs Home and the Blue Cross Animals Society of Victoria.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

One should not conclude that the Internet has not finished changing. The Internet will continue to change as new technologies are developed. It is changing now to allow mobile phones to display the Internet. It is, and will continue, to change our people to people means of communication. No longer is it necessary to purchase a stamp and visit a mail box and wait several weeks for a reply to an overseas letter. Without leaving your home or office you can write and receive a reply within hours - perhaps even minutes. URLs of websites and email addresses are common place on television or print advertisements, letterhead and business cards.

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RECOMMENDED INTERNET BROWSING

Please Note: It is one of the frustrations of the Internet that sites come and go. Apologies for any 'not found' message you may receive, but all URL were current at time of writing

http://www.petnet.com.au Petcare Information and Advisory Service

http://www.peg.apc.org/-chiron/mpm/index.htm the Municipal Pet Management Information Page

Local government

http://www.peg.apc.org/-councilnet/welcome.html Local Government Online Australia

http://www.algin.net.au/ Australian Local Government Information Network

http://www.vicnet.net.au/vicnet/localgovt.htm Local Government - Victoria List of Councils

http://www.vicnet.net.au/-mav/mav.htm Municipal Association of Victoria

http://www.lga.sa.gov.au Local Government Association of South Australia

http://www.easttorrens.sa.gov.au/ Local Government South Australia

http://www.easttorrens.sa.gov.au/councils/index.html List of South Australian Council Sites

Council Sites

http://www.wa.gov.au/gov/dolg/councils/lgovtwa.html Local Government in WA

http://ingomar.lgat.tas.gov.au/ Local Government Association of Tasmania

http://www.lgsa.org.au/index.html Local Government and Shires Association of NSW

http://www.lgsa.org.au/index.html Local Government Association of the Northern Territory

http://www.manningham.vic.gov.au/ City of Manningham

http://www.lakewoodcity.org/ Lakewood, California.USA

http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/3961/InnoPet.html InnoPet Park, USA

http://members.aol.com/jiaf/cityhallnews/index.htm Petersburg Illinois USA

http://www.abag.ca.gov/abag/local_gov/examples.html Examples of how local government use the internet (USA)

Welfare

http://www.sfspca.org/ San Francisco SPCA

http://www.ezycolour.com.au/RSPCA/ RSPCA Australia

http://www.vicnet.net.au/-lostdogs/home.htm The Lost Dogs Home

http://www.wwwins.net.au/bluecross/bluecross.html The Blue Cross Animals Society of Victoria

Veterinary

http://www.ava.com.au Australia Veterinary Association

http://www.usyd.edu.au/ University of Sydney

http://www.unimelb.edu.au University of Melbourne

http://www.murdoch/edu.au Murdoch University

http://www.cc.uq.edu.au/about.html University of Queensland

http://www.wustl.edu/NetVet Washington University

http://www.vetcornell.edu/ Cornell University USA

http://www.soe.purdue.edu/ Purdue University USA

Responsible Ownership Information for Pet Owners

http://www.pedigree.com/ Waltham World of Pet Care

http://www.speedyvet.com/ Speedyvet - Resources for the Aussie Veterinary Professional

http://www.petsource.com/ Petsource

http://www.cycledog.com/ Cycle Dog Food

http://www.purina.com/ Purina Pet Care Centre

http://www.iamsco.com/ The Iams Company Home Page

http://www.fancypubs.com/petindustry/print/ppn/main.htm Pet Product News Online

http://www.wwwins.net.au/dogsdownunder.html Dogs Downunder

Schools

http://www.gsn.org/cf/index.html International Schools Cyber Fair 97

http://www.anfi.pacit.tas.gov.au/fahan/narrate.html Fahan School, Sandy Bay, Tasmania

http://cyberfair.gsn.org/acreekp/index.htm Anderson Creek Primary School Victoria

http://cyberfair.gsn.org/pat/Narrate.html St Patrick's School, Tongala, Victoria

http://cyberfair.gsn.org/dshs/narrate.html Dubbo High School, NSW

And for a bit of imagination

http://www.usaweekend.com/ USA Weekend

http://www.unitedmedia.com/comics/dilbert/ The Dilbert Zone

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http://www.sfspca.org/ San Francisco SPCA

http://www.manningham.vic.gov.au/ City of Manningham

http://www.ava.com.au Australian Veterinary Association

http://www.ezycolour.com.au/RSPCA/ RSPCA Australia

http://www.vicnet.net.au/-lostdogs/home.htm The Lost Dogs Home

http://www.wwwins.net.au/bluecross/bluecross.html The Blue Cross Animals Society of Victoria

http://www.petnet.com.au Petcare Information and Advisory Service

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Denise Humphries is a Consultant with the Petcare Information and Advisory Service and developed and maintains the www.petnet.com.au Internet site. She is a member of the International Webmasters Association and in March 1997 attended the World Internet conference in Los Angeles. PetNet, Dogs Downunder and other sites kept by her have won awards and have been favourably reviewed in major Internet and computer publications. Her major interest is purebred dogs and for 38 years she has been an exhibitor and breeder and is an international dog judge. She currently is owned by one demanding Old English Sheepdog and a cat. She regularly writes articles on pet-related subjects and is a member of the Dog Writers Association of America. The Internet has reduced the barriers of distance in the 'dog world' allowing her regular contact with overseas fanciers and exchange of information. Generally a 'good time is had by all'.