

Enter an era of global revolution

The rapid growth and development of the Internet is ushering in a host of new opportunities for television, radio and film, argues Suzi Pritchard

W elcome to the Internet, the global marketplace and future of broadcast media. When the human race moved out of caves and started farming, a market place became necessary. A place to buy and sell, advertise services and skills, meet people and exchange information – and, for performers, a place to find an audience and a performing space.

As villages turned into towns and towns became cities, the performing spaces evolved into theatres. Technological advances created the film industry, radio and then television.

Now we are facing another creative leap – a major development in communication, compliments of computer technology. By using the Internet, we can buy and sell to a global audience, talk to people anywhere in the world, research, market and advertise for the price of a local phone call if we have access to a suitable computer and software.

Approximately five per cent of people already use the Internet, and it is estimated that, by 2010, half the world's population will join them. Most Internet experts believe that, by then, radio, television and film will be available on the Net with superb sound and visuals.

At present, even with the most advanced equipment, Net sound is tinny and video appears jerky, like early films. There can be long waits for

transmission or connection. The problem is bandwidth – the way information travels between broadcaster and audience. Telephone lines transmit the signals, and can handle only a limited amount of electronic material per second. ISDN lines and optical cables could do the job, but installing them would involve massive expense, tearing up pavements and trees in the process. Satellite transmission has possibilities, but there are still major technical problems to overcome.

Danielle Eubank, a member of BBC Broadcast's new media development team, is certain that effective solutions will be found. A world of opportunities exists for online broadcasting, particularly in the area of interactive media. She sees interactivity as a great virtue of the Net, allowing viewers participation, greater choice and the potential to become broadcasters themselves.

In ten years time, she predicts a living room computer with a large screen, smaller screens in other rooms, and individual hand units – possibly voice-activated – on which shopping, family business, education, entertainment and the arts can be accessed.

Internationally originated television, radio and films of every type will be available through user choice menus including current/new programmes and well-stocked libraries of old ones.

The team's research shows that we like doing several things at once – watching



'A world of opportunities' – Danielle Eubank, of BBC Broadcast's new media development team

EastEnders, eating a sandwich and chatting to someone. A noticeable trend is simultaneously watching TV and talking to other watchers on the Net. This desire to interact figures greatly in the plans of programme makers and writers, who recognise that the Net offers the potential for new and different kinds of broadcasting.

Mondial Television was set up by Alan Fountain, an experienced TV producer and programme maker, to develop that potential. His company is a one-stop shop for the infant global media market, providing planning, research and development facilities for online and internal medias, information about media culture around the world, plus distribution and selling of facilities, also on a global scale.

Another arm of the company will concentrate on creating experimental programmes that exploit the advantages of the Net – the ability to mix sound, video, graphics, animation, text and interactive feedback in a Windows format. The organisation is currently working on a Web Diaries package.

The BBC is a pioneer in net technology and use. Its Web site (<http://www.bbc.co.uk>) is one of the most visited in the world. In March the site received 80 million visits. It is a beautiful, elegantly designed site with well-written content and graphics and plenty of interactive activities for visitors.

Since English is the common language of the Net and the BBC is an internationally-respected brand name, the future looks bright for BBC Online and quality broadcasting in cyberspace.

Other commercial production companies are gearing up to make Net TV and radio programmes, and some are

already being broadcast on MSN, the Microsoft network. The appearance of free Internet Service Providers (the companies that link you to the Net) such as BT ClickFree, has forced the original ISPs – whose income is generated by subscription and advertising – to rethink their policies.

AOL (America Online) has premiered the first online celebrity chat show, hosted by Mark Lamarr, featuring guests like Jonathan Ross and Julia Carling. Prince Charles has expressed an interest in appearing on the show, which is broadcast in text. Sound and vision broadcasts are a possibility, but would need complex technical and creative backup.

Tom Laidlaw, head of AOL's Entertainment production, believes that the current state of Net broadcasting is comparable to television in the early fifties – and much more. "It's part of a global industry which has 50 many applications that we don't yet understand them all," he says.

Laidlaw is working with TV production companies to develop new concepts for online entertainment and to expand the events and sites which have already proved popular, like the online discussion groups after Diana's death. Income from advertising and subscription fees depend on pulling in the crowds.

The ultimate delight of the Net is the ease with which you and I can set up our own Web site, our own broadcasting/publishing company.

It only needs a computer connected by modem to the net, some WebSpace, often free from ISPs, and basic software, like MS's 'Front Page'.

See you in cyberspace!
 ■ Suzi Pritchard is writing an interactive novel on the Net with a grant from West Midlands Arts

The screenshot shows the BBC Online homepage with a navigation menu on the left, a main content area with news headlines, and a sidebar with various services and links. The main headline reads 'Friday' with a 'NEWS' section below it. Other sections include 'SPORT', 'WEATHER', 'EDUCATION', and 'WORLD SERVICE'.

International audience – the BBC's Internet site