Would Internet Meet Global Expectation?

Tan Tin Wee
Head, Internet Research and Development Unit
National University of Singapore

Meeting global expectation of the Internet is like aiming at multiple rapidly moving targets. Today, the Internet has met with international acceptance in terms of global interconnectivity and the conduit for communications and information exchange. It has already become the de facto global information infrastructure (GII). But as it becomes so, expectations rapidly change and some are conflicting expectations.

People expect the Internet to be a global communications forum free from censorship, strict regulation and government influence, and yet expect it to be protected against hackers, crackers, IP spoofers, mail fakers, spammers, flammers, pornographers, drug smugglers, syndicated crime, impersonators, slanderers, etc. Issues concerning law enforcement on the Internet, legal implications of usage, ethics and morality are highly sensitive and envoke emotionally charged debates because expectations of the Internet vary from person to person, and change from time to time.

For electronic commerce to take place, the expectation is to have a network as secure as it can ever be, where we know exactly who is who he claims to be, and doing only what is allowed. But issues of authentication, authorisation, non-repudiability, secure transactions, systems and networks are still being worked on: we are still grappling with the perennial problem of Internet security.

As the network expands, and network nodes and traffic rise, we will face shortage of IP numbers, overwhelming demand for domain names, expanding routing tables, increasing network traffic congestion and collisions unless the Internet community can pull together with higher speed backbones, richer interconnectivity, and tweak the technology more rapidly to meet these demands and the global expectation of wait-free instantaneous information retrieval.

As the Internet globalises, more and more non-native-English speaking people will demand for multilingual support. Machine translation systems, multilingual domain names, multilingual-capable Internet applications in email, Web browsers, network newsgroups are needed if the Internet is expected to be the new medium for the multilingual masses. And we have hardly begun where globally accepted multilingual standards and multilingual tools are concerned, but we're getting there.

Because the Internet is a tremendously liberating tool, and a great equaliser or leveller for opportunities, those who cannot get on the net are seriously becoming the so-called information have-nots of tomorrow. The entry barriers are still the computer and the network, both in terms of financial cost and the educational level. Hardware, networking and telecommunication costs are dropping rapidly; Internet applications are increasingly plug-and-play but there exists a generation, still lost to the technology. Whether the $500 Internet box can further lower these entry barriers remains to be seen, but it certainly does look promising.

Where people with disabilities are concerned, the Internet holds new promises for overcoming visual defect, hearing impairment, physical handicap etc. As more and more assistive technologies are becoming available to the person with disabilities - tools that help them overcome the communication and information barrier caused by their disability - expectations will rise. Cost, education and culture remain major challenges in implementing such technologies for people with disabilities.

As the Internet evolves and as its connectivity ramifies, new emerging Internet technologies will continue to drive demand and escalate expectation, which in turn, drives more technological progress. Whether the Internet will meet the expectations of the global village may be a moot point, but there is no doubt that these are exciting times for us as we enter the new millennium.