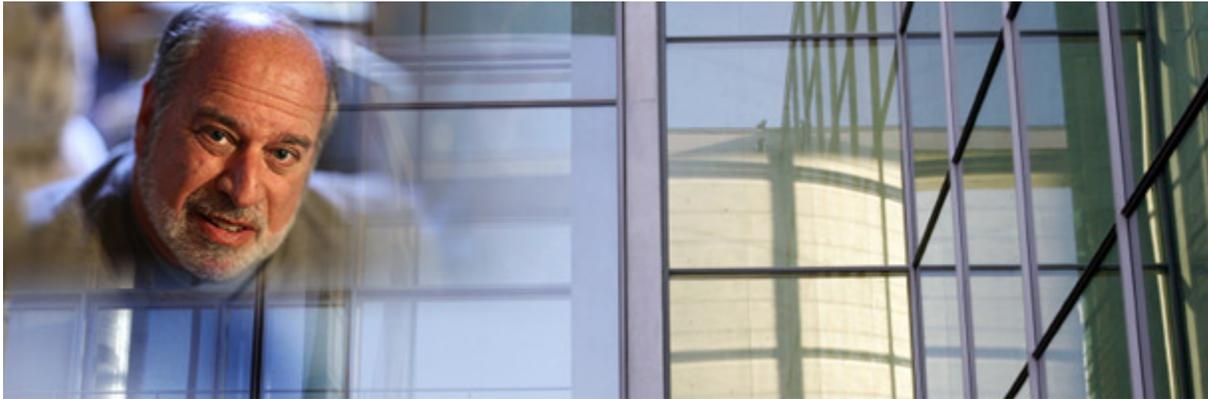


Just How Awesome Is the Internet Anyway? (Apr 15)



by Marc Rosenberg

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“There is so much information online, it’s assuredly more than we, as a society, let alone us in eLearning in our little corner of the world, can ever fully handle. So how will we use the infinite power of the web—power that no one is precisely sure how to harness completely and safely—to bring the right knowledge to the right people, at the right place and time, and at the right level of detail, without drowning in it all? It’s our #1 challenge, I believe.”

Way back on October 1, 1999, *Business Week* magazine marveled at the emerging Internet:

“The power to navigate the world at the click of a mouse is a force that is transforming our lives like none before.”

And if the web was such a powerful force back then, it blows the mind to consider what it is today. Even though we act like it’s been here forever, it has really only been of practical use for about twenty years (although earlier iterations have been around since 1969). From politics to the media, from business to government, from communication to education, and from across the street to around the world, it impacts everything. Nothing has changed our lives so much, so fast, as the Internet.

For us in learning and performance, the same is true. We’ve had computer-based training in some form for decades, with relatively little progress, until the Internet. Our push into informal/online learning would just be a footnote in our business without the web. Yet as big as the online learning world is likely to get, it will always be just a couple of drops in the huge Internet ocean.

The transforming web

So let’s take a break from our own world to look at the bigger picture. It all began as a government research tool but now pervades every aspect of our lives. We hate it and love it at the same time, and some of us are addicted to it. It started out as just a place to get information, with most websites set up only for reading. By the end of the 1990s, we began to do transactions online. This gave rise to sites like Amazon and eBay and the notion of eCommerce. Buying online became commonplace—once a frightful experience, now we don’t give it a second thought. The ability of the Internet to manage transactions gave rise to learning management systems, which undoubtedly helped the eLearning industry boom. And, as speeds got faster, the web has become a true multimedia platform.

Now a third transition of the web is well underway. While still a source for information and transactions, it has become very social. Many-to-many conversations and collaborations take place online. Everyone is a content consumer *and* a content creator. And the tools to do all of this keep getting easier and easier to use. Where we will go next is anyone's guess, but for sure, we're not done.

The size and power of the Internet

As the Internet moves in new directions and further into our lives and our work, we often take its enormous influence for granted. How big and powerful is it, really? It's not something that can easily be put into words. Fortunately, the web provides its own answers. [Infographics](#), [like this one](#), can help. Here are some more interesting (and fun) sites that help put it all in perspective:

- [Forty Maps that Explain the Internet](#). Watch the Internet grow and change since its very beginning.
- [A Snapshot of One Minute on the Internet](#). Remember, there are almost 526,000 minutes in a year!
- [What Happens in a Facebook Minute](#). And that's just *one* app!
- [A Guide to the Internet of Things](#) and [How the Internet of Things Will Rule Your Workday in 2020](#). It's already happening. Your car talks to the dealership, your house talks to the power company, and your bathroom scale talks to your phone, which then talks to your doctor.
- [Internet Live Stats](#). Check this site out for the current total number of websites.
- [The Internet in Real Time](#). Not an infographic exactly, but an illustration of real time web activity.

Cautions

While we've become accustomed to the Internet, it's worth being reminded from time to time how amazing it all really is. The future of the web looks bright, but it's not completely rosy. Bruce Schneier's [excellent commentary](#) about how we must pro-actively shape the Internet's future, and Bridget Shirvell's [Fifteen Predictions for the Future of the Internet](#), include both positive and negative consequences of the growing web. Also, the continuing debate over "net neutrality" may have serious implications for web access, including eLearning (especially for [public and higher education](#)). Food for thought.

It can be overwhelming

There is so much information online, it's assuredly more than we, as a society, let alone us in eLearning in our little corner of the world, can ever fully handle. So how will we use the infinite power of the web—power that no one is precisely sure how to harness completely and safely—to bring the right knowledge to the right people, at the right place and time, and at the right level of detail, without drowning in it all? It's our #1 challenge, I believe.

A couple of final fun facts: if you're thinking of downloading the entire Internet (and who isn't?), at today's speeds, [Physics.org](#) suggests it will take you around [three million years to download its estimated 550 trillion megabytes of data](#). Quite a long time for something that weighs only about [two ounces](#).

Mind blown.

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